Kia Ora Koutou

Welcome to the term two issue of ConnectED

In this issue we feature a story on Karyn Carson’s PhD research into the development of an innovative computer game that can reliably assess new entrants’ phonological awareness ability and predict their early reading achievement. ConnectED readers who have seen the University of Canterbury’s television advertising campaign may recognise Karyn’s work by way of the provocative question ‘What if we got five year-olds to write the reading curriculum?’

In other stories, Dr Kathleen Quinlivan discusses her recent research on how teachers, educators and student-teachers understand what it means to know and to learn in the 21st century, Chris Jansen talks about bringing postgraduate study to Linwood College, Dr Chris Astall reflects on the nationwide 2012 Primary Science Week events, while another article provides details on midyear enrolment options. Professor Niki Davis focuses on e-Learning and ICT in response to the Ministry of Education document: Shaping Education: Directions of Education Renewal in greater Christchurch in this issue’s Viewpoint section.

Dr Mere Skerrett is the subject of the Staff Profile. Dr Skerrett has a long history in progressing Māori education and was one of the architects of the Kotahi Mano Kaika language strategy 12 years ago, which she recently reviewed.

We, at UC College of Education, hope you enjoy this issue of ConnectED and, as always, are keen on your feedback. If you have any comments, suggestions, or story ideas please email them to our communications co-ordinator nick.maitland@canterbury.ac.nz

I wish you all the best in the second half of the year.

Professor Gail T. Gillon
Pro–Vice–Chancellor

What if 5 year olds wrote the reading curriculum?

A primary school education is not what it used to be. The tools of the trade have changed, for starters. Instead of chalk, dusters and blackboards, we have laptops, live internet streaming and computerised whiteboards. And gone are the days of learning your ABCs by rote. Many of today’s new entrants are already tech-savvy. They’re learning to read and write in new ways – even taking part in self-assessments that can be used to write personalised reading lessons.

Arguably, an average day in the classroom has never been more exciting. Canterbury University’s PhD student Karyn Carson thinks so.

An innovative phonological awareness assessment tool is helping new entrants play a central role in their own learning. The tool, developed by University of Canterbury, College of Education PhD student Karyn Carson (under the supervision of Professor Gail Gillon and Dr Therese Boustead), has taken two-and-a-half years to perfect.

It works like a simple 15–minute computer game and can be operated by a five-year-old without adult supervision.

It features four tasks on rhyming, identifying the first sound in a word and recognising letters and letter sounds. More complicated tasks can be added to suit children aged between five-and-a-half and six years.

The tool has been designed to assess a child’s phonological awareness and produce data a teacher can use to develop individual reading programmes.

“PhD student Karyn Carson

“In the past, a child may have sat down with his teacher and been assessed using a formal paper-based test, which can be time consuming for both teacher and child,” says Ms Carson, a former speech-language therapist and New Zealand Top Achiever Doctoral Scholarship recipient.

Ms Carson’s tool also identifies children who are likely to struggle with reading a year down the track. Preliminary tests show her tool is between 92 to 94 percent accurate in predicting a child’s reading ability at six-years old.

“This tool not only frees up teacher time, it also means five-year-olds – including those who may experience reading difficulties – are more likely to get tested in this crucial area of reading development.

“To me, that’s one of the most exciting outcomes of my work,” she says. Karyn’s research also demonstrated that evidenced based phonological awareness instruction implemented by class teachers (in addition to the regular literacy curriculum) was highly effective in raising early literacy achievement for most children in the year 1 classrooms that participated in the intervention trial.
New research published by academics at the UC College of Education has investigated the implications of the 2007 revised New Zealand Curriculum for how teachers, educators and student teachers understand what it means to know and to learn in the 21st century.

The Teaching and Learning Research Initiative (TRLI) funded research project, titled “Shifting conceptualisations of knowledge and learning in the integration of the New Zealand Curriculum in teacher education”, was led by Dr Kathleen Quinlivan (Educational Studies and Human Development) and Dr Jane Abbiss (Māori, Social and Cultural Studies), along with former UC colleague Dr Vanessa de Oliveira Andreotti, now based at the University of Oulu, Finland. Also involved in the project as practitioner researchers were Dr Jae Major, Alison Ayrton, Juliet Fry, Helen Moore, Kerri Fitzgerald, Judi Bruce, Amosa Fa’afoi, Wayne Freeth and Neville Myers. The project aimed to understand how to best support educators to explore and critically engage with 21st century ideals of knowledge and learning, and how they affected pedagogical practices.

Preparing students as 21st century learners is an underpinning concept of the 2007 New Zealand Curriculum.

“What we attempted to do with this project was to make a case for valuing ways of knowing which, traditionally, have not been given particularly high status,” said Quinlivan. “Instead of thinking about knowledge and learning in terms of narrow conceptualisations of ‘back to basics’ literacy approaches we critically engage with and re-vision the knowledges considered most worth knowing. For example, in two case studies we explored the potential of embodied ways of knowing through dance and the visual arts, and considered the extent to which they enabled young people to live and to learn in contemporary times.”

The project also endeavoured to position educators, both teacher educators and teachers in schools, as active and critical curriculum constructors, rather than technocrats. The project included eight case studies produced by the practitioner researchers. Each practitioner researcher, including both pre-service and inservice teacher educators, explored projects within their area of professional interest and practice. The educators’ explored knowledge and learning within a diverse range of contexts, including engaging with cultural difference, leadership and teaching ESOL.

“One of the case-studies involved a teacher educator whose project explored what it means for teachers to be ‘knowers’. An issue in teacher education is that there is often the expectation that teachers have to take on this mantle of becoming an authoritative ‘expert knower’, yet that orientation is not always helpful in encouraging students to engage with what it means to live and learn in uncertain contemporary times. The project explored the possibilities and challenges of reframing teachers’ identities as knowers. It can be really destabilising for a teacher, to call into question such a taken-for-granted role,” said Quinlivan.

The methodology used by Quinlivan and Abbiss to analyse the data across the case studies was itself unique. A dual meta-ethnography was carried out from interpretivist and poststructuralist viewpoints. This offered two interpretations of the data, which included the eight reported case studies, pre and post interviews with practitioner researchers and pre and post-questionnaires completed by student teachers and teachers in schools who were participants in the case study projects. The interpretivist analysis focused on the practitioner researchers’ narratives of the issues raised in shifting conceptualisations of knowledge and learning. The post-structural analysis focused on ways in which both the overall project and the case studies operated as sites of resignification of the knowledges considered most worth knowing, and critically engaged with the politics of knowledge production.

“Doing a dual-analysis of the data was quite an innovative aspect of the project,” said Quinlivan. “Most research looks at the data through one theoretical lens, but we were interested in exploring the potential of complementary theoretical understandings. We analysed the data from two different perspectives; the findings had two different theoretical spins on them. Undertaking a dual analysis meant that the results were so much richer and more nuanced.”

The research has been submitted to TRLI and will soon be published on its website. For more information visit www.tlri.org.nz.
UC Partnership in action
College of Education and Linwood College partner up for postgraduate study to enhance leadership.

What is the best solution when a school has a large number of staff members keen to undertake postgraduate study? Bring the College of Education to the school. That was the result of a recent collaboration between Linwood College and the UC College of Education.

When the College of Education began its Partnership with Schools initiative, Linwood College principal, Margaret Paiti saw a great opportunity to get involved and explore ways to link research and practice within educational contexts and support staff in furthering their education aspirations. Working together with College of Education senior lecturer, Chris Jansen, the idea for a postgraduate cluster, bringing workshops and tutorials to Linwood College, was explored.

The teachers at Linwood were excited by the opportunity. After proposing it to staff at the beginning of 2011, over 20 teachers expressed interest in leadership, literacy and e-learning papers. Changes in circumstances after the February 22nd Christchurch earthquake trimmed the number to 11, but the remaining teachers formed a tight group keen to develop skills and share experiences. Chris met with on a monthly basis after school time. The group studied courses from the Postgraduate Diploma in Education (Leadership) programme and quickly found that the content strongly supported the school’s strategic direction.

“The leadership courses lined up really well with the school’s strategic goals,” said Chris.

“They are individual teachers studying an extramural paper, but they are participating in a professional learning group talking about things like distributing leadership, appraisal and professional learning, and community partnerships – all of which are really important to the school. It was particularly powerful because some were from the senior leadership team, others were Heads of Department and Deans, as well as there being teachers with perhaps 5 years experience who were exploring their first leadership role. In my experience the diversity was one of the key features, and one that is quite unusual in a school setting. We had a cross section of staff who might otherwise never formally meet like this, and we created an environment where anyone could speak and put their ideas forward.”

Recent feedback from the teachers highlighted the benefits of the collaboration.

“I have appreciated UC coming to us, as there is no way I would have done it otherwise,” one teacher said, while another noted they received “great support from lecturers – patient, flexible and great at helping ‘dust off’ the old academic skills.” Another spoke of the benefits for the school and said they were presented with “good opportunities to get together with staff and broaden the pool of leadership at Linwood College. Any initiative that gets teachers talking with one another and critically reflecting on their practice will strengthen practice across the school and ultimately be of benefit to the students.”

After finishing their first year of courses, the capacity building benefits within the school are obvious, said Chris.

“What I’m noticing now is that the teachers who did the papers last year, are now catalysts in the school. They look at the school more broadly and their ideas forward.”

Based on the success of the programme, Chris said plans were underway to extend the reach of the initiative and involve a wider range of schools. Options could include further professional learning groups within a school, or interschool postgraduate clusters.

“We have been talking with schools in the Kaiapoi area and we are hoping to set up a cross school cluster there in 2013. Similarly, we are meeting with principals in the Bays Cluster (Sumner/Redcliffs/Heathcote/Mt Pleasant) with a view to extending the Linwood College leadership professional learning group into that cluster. Cross school clusters like this have huge potential because not only are teachers meeting people from neighbouring schools to study these leadership papers, but they can then consider creating community partnerships together.

“The intent of the Partnership with Schools programme is just that – to partner, to see where we can share resources, information and support to further enhance our education of young people.”

For more information on the UC Partnership with Schools initiative, visit http://www.education.canterbury.ac.nz/partnership/index.shtml. Chris Jansen can be contacted at chris.jansen@canterbury.ac.nz/partnership/index.shtml.
Where do butterflies go over winter?
This is one of the questions occupying the minds of young primary school scientists across the country following the Primary Science Week during May.

Academics at the College of Education once again teamed up with members of the New Zealand Association of Primary Science Educators (NZAPSE) to host Primary Science Week. Educators from around the country were united by a series of workshops and activities designed to support teachers in the teaching and learning of science in primary schools. Ten regional hubs played host to the activities in the surrounding areas, with the week culminating in a major, nationwide ‘Big Experiment.’

Nationally, 700 teachers from 168 schools participated in a variety of workshops, ranging in focus from creating butterfly gardens, forensic science, animals in school, using children’s books to teach science, physics and kitchen chemistry. During this week, the NZAPSE offered ideas for science activities, free teacher resources and competitions for children.

Dr Chris Astall, UC College of Education senior lecturer and NZASE National Coordinator, was particularly happy with the event, as it provided an opportunity for primary teachers to gain new ideas and grow confidence in teaching science.

“This is the second year the event has run and more and more schools are coming onboard and making science a focus for Term 2. Teachers throughout New Zealand are given an opportunity for professional development which, in turn, will support students learning in science. With no Ministry Primary Science Advisors, teachers rely on the goodwill of their colleagues and organisation such as the NZAPSE to support their learning. We know science teaching can be challenging for many teachers and the May 2012 Science Education Review Office report suggested that science is only being taught effectively in 27% of schools.”

This year’s event saw NZAPSE team up with the Monarch Butterfly New Zealand Trust to present the ‘Big Experiment’, where children were asked to become ‘citizen scientists’ and provide data on the annual migration patterns of Monarch butterflies.

“One of the key initiatives in developing National Science Week, was to have an investigation that all children and families could do at school or at home. Last year was the MeadowFresh Milk Experiment, this year we are asking children to help scientists as they try to solve a real issue – where do the butterflies go over winter? The national experiment will help foster the skills of scientists such as questioning, investigating, working together, gathering data and using communicating in their findings.”

A new idea for the 2012 event was to provide options for teachers located outside the regional hub to become involved. The ‘Too Far Away’ initiative allowed teachers to access resources via the NZASPE website and was designed to encourage schools to get involved with delivering a range of school based activities.

Planning for the 2013 National Primary Science Week is already under way, with a proposed date of 20–24th May. Dr Astall encourages interested teachers to follow the NZAPSE website at www.nzase.org.nz/primaryscience or contact him at chris.astall@canterbury.ac.nz
Tell us about your history in education.

My history in education started in earnest with the birth of my first son. I knew there were issues in education and I had started getting involved in the Kōhanga Reo movement. I began as a primary teacher, but then I retrained as an early childhood teacher, and later did a higher diploma in bilingual education, as well as the Whakapakari qualification through the Kōhanga Reo. I then did my masters degree as I wanted to continue researching because Māori medium education was so new and we were, in the main, second language learners teaching our children te reo Māori (albeit with the help of my native speaking mother and grandmother). So I did my masters in Auckland, while living in Hamilton. I would drive up in the evenings to attend my lectures.

The next progression was my doctorate at Waikato University. I wanted to keep researching; I was a reflective learning practitioner. And they were volatile times; there was a lot of controversy at the time, which still continues in many respects. There was Moutoa Gardens or Pakaitore and other land occupations; te reo Māori hikoi; the Fiscal Envelope, One Tree Hill; there was the seabed saga; Tariana and the holocaust debate; conscientising times for those of us involved in the establishment of Kōhanga Reo and Kura Kaupapa Māori. Māori education is highly political. When we established Tōku Māpihi Maurea Kura Kaupapa Māori, we occupied a Council house, that was the beginning of what is now a very successful Māori medium school.

Once I had finished my doctorate I stepped out of the field to develop a teacher education programme and I developed the very first Māori medium early years programme of its kind in the country. It focused on teaching children from 0 to 8 years, so it is a transportable (across sectors) degree programme.

What brought you to the College of Education?

The job came up at the UC College of Education and I thought it sounded like a really good opportunity to work in the mainstream sector. All the years I had worked in the Kōhanga movement were voluntary and I knew eventually I would have to move out. I love it here, and Gail [Gillon, Pro-Vice-Chancellor of Education] is very supportive of progressing Māori education. We have our Māori Education Research Lab and have established Te Kāhui Kahukura, of which I am the Chair. I want to start a Kōhanga here in the Dovedale Village and get my students in so they have the opportunity to do a practicum in our very own Māori medium centre.

Working for a university helps when looking for funding for research projects. I’ve been researching the Māori language of a whānau activity – te rapu tītī (mutton–birding) and other iwi projects funded by my Ngāi Tahu iwi. I am involved in an Assemblage, which is a big international project. I’ve also worked on a number of national projects funded by the Ministry of Education and am just finishing off a literature review on what quality immersion early childhood education looks like.

A passion for Māori language in education comes through strongly in your history.

For 15 years I was actively involved in the Māori medium sector, but it’s when you are operating at the interface between Māori and Pākehā that you really get to sharpen your thinking because it is challenging. I’ve worked really hard in early childhood and primary sectors, which are slowly transforming, but there needs to be a lot more work done at secondary level. Te Reo Māori is marginalised. For example, when we came here, I wanted my daughter, who is English/ Māori bilingual, to be able to pick up a third language. Bilingual English/ Māori speakers, or BEMS as they are known, can pick up a third language really quickly and easily. My eldest daughter is a BEMS Spanish trilingual. But my youngest daughter was unable to maintain her BEMS status and pick up a foreign language. She could maintain her English and pick up a foreign language, but not both her English and Māori plus a foreign language in the normal secondary school timetabling because Māori is timetabled in the foreign language slot. It became a struggle just to be able to maintain her Māori language which has little status in that sector. To me it is simply not good enough.

It’s hard enough as it is, trying to keep teenagers speaking Māori in the community without facing these types of barriers in schools. But in teacher education we’ve had a movement towards being accepting of diversity and acknowledging that Māori (and Māori language) have a really important part to play in the development of this country. Always have – it just hasn’t been reflected in public policy, which is why last year I started my law degree. I hope to complete that degree while here at Canterbury.

Tell us about your research interests?

I’m looking at what’s lost when a language dies. I would like to see our language survive into the future; our ways of doing things and our ways of thinking and knowing. My research aims at providing a bit more ideological clarification around why it is important for Te Reo Māori to survive as a communicative language and what is unique and distinct about our language and culture. I am interested in challenging the historical monolingual English bias in some aspects of the education system and promoting Māori educational success. I’m always interested in researching ways of improving educational experiences for Māori students and challenging traditional ways of teaching so that it better suits all learners. I am also really interested in bi-literacy development.

Outside of the profession, what sort of things do you like to do?

I love to paint, when I get the time. I have always been interested in handicrafts; anything that gets my creative side going; swimming, walking and reading, of course. Family is important and I am now blessed with a perfect mokopuna.
Viewpoint

In this issue’s Viewpoint section, Professor Niki Davis discusses how e-Learning is challenging traditional views of the classroom environment and unbundling the many responsibilities of a teacher. Examples are given to current practice and research, which have the ability to inform and lead New Zealand education into the 21st century. These are included in the College of Education e-Learning Lab’s recent response to the Government.

What will it take for greater Christchurch to lead New Zealand in the use of ICT infrastructure and digital technologies in ways that advantage learners?

At first sight it may appear that the educational renewal of schooling and tertiary education in this region is so challenged that aspirations to exhibit national leadership are unrealistic. However, we can point to a range of current work and opportunities that lay the foundation to establish and maintain this leadership and indicate what it may take for “greater Christchurch to lead New Zealand in the use of ICT infrastructure and digital technologies in ways that advantage learners” and also support the return of more international students to Christchurch.

Research by the e-Learning Lab and collaborators indicates that the best infrastructure to support learners in the 21st century has moved away from teacher centric classrooms to larger open plan spaces in educational institutions that are blended with learning off campus at home, in the community and at work. The move to larger, more open spaces with careful attention to light, sound and ICT, retains supervision and support while releasing some teachers to design learning experiences and support learners with a more personalised approach valued in all sectors of education. Examples include:

- The unique design of our technology-rich collaborative classroom for 80 students on UC Dovedale campus that facilitates many modes of learning enabling the blending of lecture, large and small group work as well video conferencing to bring in distant students and experts including students in groups on other campuses.

- Collaborative research into e-learning clusters of schools in New Zealand has identified a mature school’s design for flexible student space in Roxburgh area school and the importance of communication on the roles of ePrincipal and eDean.

- As consultants on the design of Southern Region Health School (SHRS) physical (UC lecturer Nicky Dabner) and virtual spaces (Prof Davis), SHRS has influenced the uptake of blended and networked approaches in health schools nationwide.

- Research to develop school principals’ leadership of future oriented schools (Dr Julie Mackey) with a core network of schools in Wellington and Christchurch.

- Now in the final year of a three-year regional ICTPD cluster for CantaNet and WestNet, Prof Davis is stimulating the speedy evolution of networked schools, including one in central Christchurch.

- We are collaborating with GCSN for virtual outreach by UC science and engineering colleagues (Drs Conner, Winter & Davis).

- Research and development of blended and online learning by our postgraduate students is also informing developments, currently with more than 40 teachers in local schools and abroad. Our courses include authentic assessment through which educators develop their skills and resources while studying with us.

- We are collaborating with colleagues in the Macmillan Brown Centre for Pacific Studies to support a project in Tonga within which 10 schools will receive a solar power generator plus 10 computers for sustainable deployment in the school and its community.

Even more important than physical space, our strategic evolutionary design of blended virtual environments indicates that an online space such as a relevant site-based Learning Management System tends to become the first stop for teachers and students, including our Māori and Pasifika students.

Our award winning initial teacher education programme, that prepares primary teachers, currently models the coherent provision of flexible learning options with multiple modes offered in multiple locations by one course leader who collaborates with a team of educators. Some of them are located in other regions of New Zealand e.g. students and staff in Rotorua schools and our regional campus facilities shared by Wairariki Institute of Technology, within which both marae and ICT infrastructure are key.

We provide national leadership and inform policy developments, some of which are related to UFBIS and the Network for Learning. For example, hundreds of future school teachers enrolled in our programmes are registered and working within MyPortfolio (Mahara) in the same venue that is provided for schools. So these student teachers support school students and their teachers to make effective use of this national facility while under the supervision of university staff.

We have an exciting vision to develop excellent teachers for all learners in New Zealand’s networked schools. Our vision would justly enable the greater Christchurch region “to lead New Zealand in the use of ICT infrastructure and digital technologies in ways that advantage learners.” Co-evolution of education and digital technologies is decoupling the many roles that a classroom teacher plays and enabling him or her to facilitate the ways that learners work together in new ways as a community of educators that also includes librarians, peer tutors and whānau. Blended virtual space removes physical limits to supervision and support. Teachers at the start of their career in initial teacher education could be recognised and supported to play a more responsible role earlier in their careers while also supporting the professional and organisational development of networked schools. Our vision also enables more ‘work–integrated learning’ and strategies that ‘better connect’ schools with tertiary organisations.

For more information on e-Learning developments, events and research at the UC College of Education visit www.education.canterbury.ac.nz/research_labs/e_learning.
Teaching and Learning
College responds to Ministry document

The UC College of Education welcomes opportunities to work together to redevelop and shape education in greater Christchurch in ways that will facilitate Māori educational success.

In line with this, it has sent a response to: Te Tareinga Matauranga, Shaping Education: Directions of Education Renewal in greater Christchurch, a document released by the Minister of Education and the Minister of Tertiary Education during May. The College of Education embraces the challenges that have been highlighted in the document and is in a strong position to support this important kaupapa.

The College of Education is ensuring graduates of teacher education, as well as current teachers in our local early childhood centres and schools, are well prepared to address some of the challenges posed in Te Tareinga Matauranga. Improving outcomes with and for Māori, guiding the process of renewal, early learning foundations and school-age learning is of paramount importance.

The College has proposed the following:

**Guiding the Process of Renewal**
That an Education Advisory Board and a Pasifika Advisory group are established and that a Waitaha Education Authority is established by Ngai Tahu.

**Early Learning Foundations**
Ensure that demand for Early Childhood Education services is met in the short and long term and that the identities, language, and cultures of learners continue to be valued and supported.

**School-Age Learning**
Ensure that the identities, languages and cultures of learners continue to be valued and supported.

To introduce modern, flexible and inclusive learning environments and to implement a digital strategy for learning in greater Christchurch. To plan an educational provision as a community network and develop better approaches to managing transition and career.

In e-Learning
The College of Education also submitted a response in regards to e-Learning and ICT. Professor Niki Davis provides more detail in this issue’s Viewpoint section.

The College of Education’s responses to the paper were contextualised in what would be envisaged as a collaborative framework with early childhood centres, schools, Principals Associations, Ministry of Education, the tertiary sector, Māori and Ngai Tahu in particular, to foster the integration of expertise and resources necessary to effect positive change for Māori and to support the education renewal and community wellbeing of the greater Christchurch district.

Mid year enrolments are now open for those seeking a qualification that specifically prepares them to work in a variety of education supporting roles. The Certificate in Learning Support (CertLS) provides students with the knowledge and skills needed to work in a range of educational settings and is suitable for both those currently working in an educational support role and those wishing to do so.

The CertLS is designed for:
- People working, or wishing to work, as teacher-aides or community support workers supporting disabled children and young people in a variety of educational and community settings;
- Parents who are assisting or seeking to assist teaching staff.

Graduates of the Certificate in Learning Support could:
- Be community support workers working with disabled people in a range of education and community settings.

**Semester 2 courses available include:**
- EDLS103 Supporting Learning and Behaviour Needs.
- EDLS104 Supporting Diverse Learners

All courses are available by distance delivery. For more information visit www.education.canterbury.ac.nz
Events Diary

Term Three 2012

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<tr>
<th>Date</th>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, 1 August</td>
<td>6pm – 7pm</td>
<td>Teaching as a Profession: Information Night, College of Education</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday, 11 September</td>
<td>5pm – 6:30pm</td>
<td>Open Evening – Rotorua, UC Rotorua Centre at Waipariki</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday, 13 September</td>
<td>4:30pm – 7pm</td>
<td>Open Evening – Nelson, UC Nelson Centre, 319 Hardy St, Nelson</td>
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<tr>
<td>Wednesday, 19 September</td>
<td>6:30pm – 8pm</td>
<td>Open Evening – New Plymouth, WITT, Bell St, NP</td>
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<tr>
<td>Tuesday, 25 September</td>
<td>5pm – 6:30pm</td>
<td>Open Evening – Greymouth, venue: TBC</td>
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<tr>
<td>Thursday, 27 September</td>
<td>4:30pm – 7pm</td>
<td>Open Evening – Christchurch, UC College of Education, Dovedale Ave, CHCH</td>
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<tr>
<td>4 and 5 October</td>
<td>All day, both days</td>
<td>International Reading Comprehension Symposium – more info: <a href="http://www.education.canterbury.ac.nz/documents/reading_symposium_12.pdf">www.education.canterbury.ac.nz/documents/reading_symposium_12.pdf</a></td>
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For more information email nick.maitland@canterbury.ac.nz

What if Gears of War 4 was your next assignment?

Given the choice between playing online video games and doing their homework, more than a few students would pick gaming, much to the chagrin of their parents. Yet recent research from UC PhD student Sorada Wattana shows that online video gaming can provide students with a non-threatening opportunity to gain confidence and improve their language skills.

Online, multi-player computer games are played in complex environments and can require a large amount of player interaction. Completion of levels can rely heavily on communication, allowing language-learners numerous opportunities to improve their language skills. The informal environment can also help motivation and develop vocabulary knowledge and skills associated with learning in general.

Sorada’s research involved 30 Thai third-year undergraduate students. During the 15-week study, the students played Ragnarok Online, an online role-playing game based on Norse mythology, and were encouraged to communicate in English, an additional language for all members of the group, while completing six new game levels developed specifically for the study.

The students’ willingness to communicate in English was measured before and after playing the game through questionnaires, conversation transcripts and interviews. The data collected at the end of the study highlighted that the students gained confidence in using English by communicating in the fun and non-threatening environment the online game provided.

“The chat transcripts revealed that most of the participants managed to maintain communicating in English throughout each computer game session,” said Sorada. “Despite identifying themselves as rarely speaking English, a great amount of English was used among the group. In addition, interview findings showed participants’ favourable support for future use of online computer games in the English classrooms.”

Overall, the results of this study led to a conclusion that online computer games could be effective tools for enhancing language learners’ enthusiasm to communicate. This, however, depends on language teachers’ careful planning of gaming activities and determined effort to harness the benefits of online computer games for language learning.