

**Hidden treasure: Unearthing aspirations and mobilising skills  
in a neighbourhood renewal context**

International Conference on Engaging Communities  
Brisbane, Australia  
14-17 August 2005

Helen Thompson\*  
Centre for Electronic Commerce and Communication  
University of Ballarat, School of Business  
University Drive, Mount Helen  
P.O. Box 663  
Ballarat, Victoria, 3353 Australia  
Phone: 61 3 5327 9418  
Fax: 61 3 5327 9405  
E-mail: h.thompson@ballarat.edu.au

Dr Steve McEachern\*  
Centre for Regional Innovation and Competitiveness  
University of Ballarat, School of Business  
University Drive, Mount Helen  
P.O. Box 663  
Ballarat, Vic 3353 Australia  
Phone: 61 3 5335 2235  
Fax: 61 3 5327 9405  
E-mail: s.mceachern@ballarat.edu.au

**Abstract**

Community strengthening approaches which emphasise local solutions to local economic, social and environmental challenges now receive significant government support. This paper examines the theoretical basis which underpins community building and place based development. It identifies a philosophy towards supporting communities which begins with a clear commitment to discovering a community's assets and capacities rather than focusing on deficiencies and problems. The focus then shifts to examining how information and communications technology (ICT) can be used creatively in a community strengthening context, introducing the Neighbourhood Renewal (NR) program, which involves a whole-of-government response in partnership with 15 local communities across Victoria, Australia. In particular, the paper presents a case study of community engagement through the provision of support for NR Employment and Learning Coordinators (ELCs) in conducting local community resident skills surveys. The purpose of the surveys is to help communities to better understand themselves and the skills they possess, to gain valuable skills through the survey process, and empower residents to make better decisions about their neighbourhood's future. Specifically, information about residents training requirements and employment aspirations will inform and direct ELCs to plan employment and training programs in their areas. The rollout of the resident skills surveys across the state of Victoria has been preceded by the pilot of similar services in the Wendouree West community. Results from the pilot are presented to explore the benefits which are being generated by combining traditional paper-based methodologies with web-based tools and services in a context where the ultimate goal is to support the economic and social health of communities.