

Convinced that face-to-face social networking isn't dead, *Deidre Donnelly* went in search of real-life ways to stay connected, engaged – and inspired.

Meetings of Minds



TUESDAY 2 AUGUST 2011, 7PM
THE ASSEMBLY, 61 HARRINGTON STREET CAPE TOWN

Pecha Kucha takes place in over 400 cities worldwide. Designed for people to meet, network, and show their work in public. The presentations are 20 images x 20 seconds each.

ABOVE: Around the world, PechaKucha nights mix brainy innovation with creativity. **RIGHT:** The Africa Centre's Talking Heads nights have treated audiences to the likes of poet and playwright D'bi Young.

T **TIRED OF SEEING** the same faces in the same places having the same conversations, a friend and I recently went on a mission. We'd feed our curiosity for the new by grabbing each and every opportunity to hear people share and speak in person. We'd make an effort to avoid the isolation of "socialising" online. Here's a diarised account of the first three events we went to:

PECHAKUCHA NIGHTS

When an e-mailer for Cape Town's PechaKucha Night (PKN) arrives in my inbox, I'm quite intrigued by the cartoonish name (it means "chit chat" in Japanese). Thanks to Google, I soon find out that these informal evenings, which take place in more than 559 cities around the world, were started in 2003 and use a "20x20" format: Nine speakers talk (or recite, or dance) for six minutes, 40 seconds, using 20 slides shown for 20 seconds each. Snaps of bright-eyed groups lounging casually, as though camped together to watch a movie, has me sold.

When PKN arrives, it's weird walking into the gritty live music venue for something cerebral. The vibe is electric: Freshlyground pumps from the speakers, the crowd is cosmopolitan, and an auntie-type is selling home-made treats. There's a shortage of seats, so we find a spot at the bar. The emcee fills us in on the PKN concept



("We're all creative thinkers, but some of us are creative doers"), reminds us that we're not about to hear pros ("Just normal folk talking about their passion") and apologises for the cramping ("Interest is growing like mad").

The evening's theme is "green," and while the scientist with Hugh Grant charm loses me a bit with his techie talk, his positivity sets the tone. There's a systems thinker, biomimicry specialist, a budding conservationist, and a US master's student who's in SA to host a "trash to treasure" party. But my favourite piece is a film by Ian Henderson. Inspired by a clock repairman, Henderson shadowed him and documented the meticulousness that goes into this age-old craft. Later, people chat to the long-haired timekeeper. According to Dave Cotton, the CT PKN head team member, this is what these nights are about – people talking to each other. "The rationale is a lot like that of the Internet – it's all about connecting – but the web is a watered-down version of real life. Here, when you see someone stammer on stage, their authenticity shows."

I've marked the date for the next PKN "schoolnight" out ... Next time, I'll be early to claim a front-row seat. Visit pechakucha-capetown.com or pechakucha.org/night/johannesburg

TALKING HEADS

Started by the Africa Centre in 2008 and happening in Joburg and Cape Town four to six times a year, these "evenings of African thought leaders" will soon roll out across the continent. They involve round-table talks with four great minds, randomly selected from a diverse group. For 10 minutes, they talk to you and three others; then the table gets to pick their brains for 10 minutes more, says Africa Centre project manager, Robin Jutzen.

It sounds fascinating (I can question a nanoscientist, a metaphysician or an artificial intelligence guru, say) and intimidating (what if I have nothing smart to say?). But Robin assures me that it's "lots of fun." My friend and

I remind ourselves of this as we hurriedly scan speaker biographies.

The venue, the Iziko South Africa National Gallery, is a treat in itself. There's art all around us, an Afro-jazz band playing, and I spot some of the maverick minds, like Zackie Achmat, mingling. My "lucky draw" of numbers seats me with gallery director Riason Naidoo, who explains the art of curating; "errorthoughtical engineer" Peter Greenwall, an expert in turning failure into innovation; and food security researcher Jane Battersby, who gives me new perspective on the city.

But my gift comes in the form of Professor Elaine Rumboll. The blues singer, poet and businesswoman tells us how to do a two-day "Attention Audit" to access our internal wisdom. The woman next to me says all the people she was seated with were suited to her, and I couldn't agree more. On my way out, I stop to admire artist Jane Alexander's famous *The Butcher Boys* sculpture, and am soon chatting to someone about the evening. I leave on a high – connecting with others is easy when there's common cause for conversation. Visit africacentre.net

TEDx TALKS

The TEDx talks may be the little cousins of the TED talks, but they're the big daddy of knowledge-sharing events in SA. On a weekend day, I'm at the Baxter Theatre to hear a line-up of speakers. (Those at home can follow via livestream.) I'm jittery with anticipation. The woman I met at Talking Heads, now seated behind me, gives me a friendly wink. Though TED lends the name, format and guidelines, the rest is up to local organisers. When Justin Beswick and Bernelle Verster make the introductions, they remind us what it's about: showcasing talent, challenging assumptions and having conversations about our shared future.

The talks are inspiring and stimulating, from Mxit's Alan Knott-Craig's insights into how anonymous communication empowers the powerless, to Professor Tim Noakes' exploration of

The Big Question

Will I ever not feel stressed?

"The mind plays a vital role in creating harmony," says His Holiness Sri Sri Ravi Shankar, humanitarian founder of the United Nations-accredited NGO, The Art of Living Foundation. When you feel less overwhelmed, sometimes it's because your thoughts have changed, and not the situation. Shankar's suggestion for mental peace is breathing meditation, because "if you breathe better, you feel better." It's also beneficial to take the focus off yourself, he adds. "Depression is like a cocoon we can lock ourselves in, so ask yourself, 'How can I contribute to society?' Being of service – even once, twice a week – can help."

how views on fitness evolve. We hear about South Africa's "dual cities" (Shannon Royden-Turner); how the humble photocopier may solve our textbook crisis (Arthur Attwell); and that poetry can bring us into ourselves (Mbali Vilakazi) – and more.

Again, what strikes me is how these events encourage camaraderie. During a break, I have the most in-depth chat with a stranger I've ever had. At the after-party, we dance with some of the day's speakers, and I meet a woman who is on a similar mission: to find smart ways to socialise. Visit tedxcape-town.org or tedxjohannesburg.co.za

After each of these outings, I felt compelled to pass along what I'd heard – both online and in person – in a loop of talking, sharing and researching. I'm still on my mission. As Walt Disney said in the quote speaker Elaine Rumboll left me with, "We keep moving forward, opening new doors, and doing new things, because we are curious and curiosity keeps leading us down new paths." 