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Empowerment through community-based learning: a double edged sword

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Abstract

Following on the back of 2 funded research projects, the activities and practices of the CNA group at the University of Brighton have undergone a period of change. The absence of funding and time to pursue research proposals currently has forced us to be creative by exploring how the academic curriculum and resources of a UK university can support the formal requirements of HE student learning and the more informal learning needs found in community practice through the development of community media/informatics learning partnerships. So that consideration might be given to the potential for CI academics, in the absence of research and development funding, to engage in meaningful community ICT research and practice partnerships, a number of CNA community informatics/media partnership activities are presented briefly through the joint lenses of community empowerment and community development lens. The significance of community voice and community learning in facilitating and enabling active citizenship and empowered communities through community informatics practices is also explored.

Keywords:

Community informatics, community media, community empowerment, community development, community learning, social capital, active citizenship

We are surrounded by a pragmatic discourse that would have us adapt to the facts of reality. *Dreams* and *utopia* are called not only useless, but positively impeding.

(Freire, 2002. p.7)

Introduction

Community informatics (CI) has always possessed a certain community development and empowerment rationale (see e.g. Gurstein, 2000 and 2003a; and Pitkin, 2006). However, the impact of CI on community development, where – “the main purpose of community development is to enable people to work together in egalitarian and democratic ways to develop collective solutions to shared problems” (Gilchrist and Rauf, 2006, p7) – is sometimes overstated. Perhaps this is the result of rhetorical devices innocently, if a little enthusiastically, employed as part of the written discourse but CI has yet to make many significant strategic contributions at macro level policy and practice. There is a richness and diversity of contributions at the micro level, indeed this conference provides a platform for these year on year but many of these appear to be less formally structured, less grounded in the rich, diverse and often socially contested spaces and social networks found in the sphere of community practice (Glen, 1993 and Butcher *et al*, 2007). We would argue that community informatics – as a discipline, or field of research, practice and policy – still has some considerable way to go before it really contributes to community development as an agent of meaningful and sustainable social change.

One of the questions before us then, perhaps the most fundamental question, is *how might community informatics contribute to community development?* We should not, consider this question in the abstract as academic or technology *experts* seeking to develop communities *from the outside* but as equal partners. Partners in the planning, design, implementation, development and even the appropriation of technological artifacts, tools, services, spaces and processes that assist and enable communities to develop and empower themselves. By grounding CI in, and contributing to, the day to day activities of community life, we make the services and technological developments that emerge as outputs of our CI knowledge and expertise social useful and therefore meaningful. As former UK Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Hazel Blears, commented, “there isn’t a single service or development in Britain which hasn’t been actively improved by involving local people.” (DCLG, 2007, p.2).

Community informatics – a community development approach to research and practice

In a critical reflection on the effectiveness of CI in contributing to community development, Pitkin describes the latter as facilitating “efforts to build local capacity, educate and organise community residents and increase their access to local policy making that affects their lives” (Pitkin, 2006, p78). Pitkin’s work encourages us to consider the effectiveness of CI through a community development lens. He urges us to be critical in and reflect on our activities and exhorts us to “collaborate in constructing truly participatory, transformative and ethical community informatics applications that support community development (Pitkin, 2006, p.95).

Of course collaboration and partnerships of this nature require input from external agencies. Policy makers, commercial enterprises, higher education institutions, community development agencies and even community practitioners bring all manner of power and influence (funding, resources, expertise, etc.) to the community partnerships table. However, power is a moveable feast that is dependent on people’s acceptance of its existence. It can and does change. It is often exchanged between groups of people and within the context of community organising and partnership development it is often based on cooperative interaction (Biklen, 1983). For community partnerships to be both effective and sustainable, the power to determine and control community processes and decision making must rest within the communities themselves.

As community development involves “a process of strengthening individuals, groups and organizations to gain the knowledge and power to work towards change in their communities (Banks, 2003 p. 12) and we are arguing that CI practices should be guided by a community development approach, community changes resulting from CI interventions should be agreed by and acceptable to the communities involved. A partnership approach to CI interventions will see CI practices shaped by community needs and community voice rather than the other way round. Eventually, as CI practices become embedded as integrated elements of community life, this will become an iterative cycle of community practice shaping CI practices which in turn shape community practice but the starting point should always be determined by community need, not academic imperative or technological expediency. A central element of effective community informatics research partnerships is that they encourage local people to become “the subject of their own investigation, rather than the object of an external agency’s concern” (Wang & Burris, 1997). Contextualizing CI as a potential transformative agent for community development focuses attention on what Gurstein terms *effective use*, i.e. “the capacity and opportunity to successfully integrate ICTs into the accomplishment of self or collaboratively identified goals.” (2003b).

Gurstein’s *effective use* thesis suggests that communities need access to communication technologies in order to assist community development in a digital age but that access in and of itself

is inadequate. Knowledge of how to use ICT is also required. As is the capacity to apply that knowledge to the contextualized processes, interactions and activities found in the social, economic, ethnic, cultural, religious, family and friendship ties (Presthus, 1970) of community life. Capacity building, through informal education practices (Packham, 2008), or community learning (Nielsen, 2002), is a prerequisite to community empowerment.

Empowering community voice through community learning

Working in partnership with communities to build individual and collective capacities so that ICT may be utilised and appropriated in ways that meet community need, support community organization and affect social change is *the big challenge* before us as community informatics researchers and practitioners. However, there is a distinction “between empowerment as *capacity building to cope with* the requirements of life more efficiently versus *capacity building to transform* the conditions of life” (Huyer and Sikoska, 2003. p4).

For many *digital age* apologists, *bridging the digital divide* focuses on public access to computers and ICT training to equip people to engage as consumers in digital age marketplaces – economy, employment, entertainment, e-government, etc. Whilst not seeking to downplay the significance of such skills and abilities, they do not adequately represent, or cater for, the full range of human needs and abilities required for citizenship in the *digital age*. The approaches suggested for achieving digital inclusion in the dominant *digital age* paradigm are indicative of the priorities of a specific techno-economic agenda. They recur, in various forms, in the various iterations of what constitutes government digital policy contributions from the *information society* debates of the 1990s (CEC, 1994a, CEC, 1994b and Gore, 1993) to current day policy contributions (DCMS, 2009; HMG, 2008 and BIS, 2009). In truth, despite technological advancements, very little has changed in the *network society* policy milieu, whilst the rhetoric of digital inclusion is clearly visible on paper and in sound bite form, reality tells another, more tokenistic tale. Policy priorities focus on encouraging consumption of ICT goods and services rather than empowering citizens in a *knowledge democracy* (Day, 2005) to shape community environments and improve the quality of life. The dominant paradigm of the *digital age* promotes submissive acceptance of existing power structures whereas, in visions of an alternative paradigm – one based on inclusion, empowerment and voice – policy, through CI research and practice, seeks to empower people to engage in democratic and transformative dialogue from which active and healthy community environments can be built, developed and sustained (Day, Khan & Hewetson, 2009).

Community voice

In much the same way as community development is motivated by the rationale to build capacity and empower people to shape their own community environments, so community informatics and community media – focusing as they do on tools and processes of community information and communications – are driven by the need to create platforms and spaces for community voice. For example, a recent treatise on community photography techniques, reflected that “community use of photography can be used to give voice to and make visible, otherwise hidden groups and community based issues” (Purcell, 2007, p2).

Purcell’s observations not only highlight the significance of community voice as an articulation of community needs, feelings, aspirations and wants but also reminds us that within the communicative ecologies (Hearn & Foth, 2007) comprising everyday community life there exists a richness and diversity of cultures, values, beliefs and goals. Community voice can in one moment be harmonious – expressing itself as one on issues and events affecting community life – and in the next can appear chaotic, contested and competing. Such is the nature of community voice, indeed, such is the nature of community – the test for community informatics is whether or not we are capable of working in

such environments; whether or not we can engage and form partnerships to create digital tools, spaces and processes that support community learning and sustain community development without imposing our own values, cultures and knowledge (Day, Khan & Hewetson, 2009).

It is our contention that stimulating, supporting and sustaining community voice is a central facet of effective community informatics research and practice. This resonates with the work of Stoecker who reasons that community-based research should focus on being useful to the community; employ diverse methods; emphasise collaboration and above all be participatory (2005), i.e. engage and involve the community, wherever and however practicable, in all stages of research. A recent discussion document about *good participatory practices guidelines* identifies a number of core principles: *shared ownership; transparency; accessibility; accountability and participatory management*. Space precludes a full discussion of these values but it is worth noting that a guiding tenet of *participatory management* suggests that the voice of communities affected by research should not be relinquished and that they should play an active and informed role in all research practices. "Participatory management should benefit all parties it helps.....build community capacity to understand and inform the research process" (UNAIDS, 2007). The growing body of evidence that *community voice* makes a significant contribution to effective community research and development was identified recently by the Executive Director of *The Communication Initiative*, who argued that, "When major development successes are assessed, there is a clear correlation between the prominence of the voices of those most affected by the issues in questions and the effectiveness of the action" (Feeks, 2009. p.13).

Community Learning

The main focus of community work and workers in the UK, since the emergence of community development in the 1960s, has been enabling people to become active, organise and engage in community action. This type of community involvement by citizens of a community is often described as *active citizenship* and has been defined as "being involved in your community, having your say and taking part in decisions that affect you. Above all it is about people making things happen" (Packham, 2008. p.149). Or put another way it "is about the active participation of people in their own transformation" (Ledwith, 1997. p.13).

We present active citizenship here as an indicator of community empowerment. It is considered alongside community learning because the voices of many communities, especially disadvantaged and marginalised communities, often go unheard in modern society and community learning is a process which, when grounded in everyday community life, enables the capacities of people to be built in an informal but relevant manner. Community learning not only enables and facilitates capacity building by equipping people with the skills, information, knowledge and support through which community voices can be heard but also gives them the confidence to speak and engage in dialogue with others – an essential ingredient when collaborating in partnership comprising people from within and beyond local community networks.

Whilst community learning focuses on any subject matter of relevance to expressed community need it is always *participatory* in approach and seeks to build *dialogue* between learners. Dialogic exchanges between learners occur when information and knowledge are exchanged. This can be through *conversational communications* and/or through groups of people *learning by doing*. In this way, community learning encourages *networking* processes in which dialogic exchanges are the transactions between community learning network nodes, i.e. learners (Nielsen, 2002). A similar portrayal of community learning processes was made by Packham when discussing a pan-European participatory research project which investigated the contribution of community learning to civic and civil involvement. Packham describes community learning processes as:

- *Learning with others* (recognising the importance of the participant's identity, connectedness to the community and a sense of agency to achieve something worthwhile);
 - *Learning from experience* (based on evaluation and critical reflection);
 - *Learning and doing* through collaborative activities undertaken by groups.
- (Packham, 2008. p.110)

From both discussions (Nielsen, 2002 & Packham, 2008) of community learning it is not difficult to identify a relationship between community learning and community development, indeed Falk & Harrison describe community learning as the processes and outcomes (the "oil in the cogs") that produce and sustain community development (1998). Whilst community learning can be described as the *oil in the cogs* of active citizenship and community action, the outcomes of change brought about through community learning processes are dependent on the nature of its community network ties.

Networks within and beyond the community, enabling leadership, and community norms and values that accept diversity, yet include some shared norms and values are three aspects of social capital that help communities to be learning communities.

(Kilpatrick, 2000, p.4)

Although referring to *distributed* communities, Huysman & Wulf identify 3 conditions of knowledge sharing as key ingredients of social capital that have significance for CI. "Community members will be more inclined to connect and use electronic networks when they are motivated to share knowledge with others, able to share knowledge and have the opportunity to share knowledge" (Huysman & Wulf, 2005. p.9). A similar argument is offered by Garratt & Piper, who in the context of community volunteering suggest that people will not participate, "unless there is the prior capacity, drive or motivation to become involved" (2008. p.56).

Trust is a big factor in developing effective networks of community knowledge exchange and learning as well as enabling the motivation and opportunity to use them for community building purposes. The networks, norms and trust that develop in communities, i.e. social capital, when individuals, families, groups, etc share information, knowledge and other resources in pursuit of common community goals, whilst respecting, even celebrating, difference and diversity, are crucial components of effective CI initiatives. However, like all forms of capital, social capital is valueless unless the opportunity (capacity) and the motivation (community development/action) to use it can be exercised. Simpson argues that, "understanding the role of social capital in the success of CI initiatives as community development activities and widespread adoption of ICTs can enhance the likelihood of the sustainability of the CI initiative, thereby increasing the benefits that the community may derive" (2005, p.114). We argue that such understanding of social capital can only permeate and influence CI partnerships when CI practices become part of the interwoven fabric of community life. Simpson concludes her seminal text on CI and social capital by reminding us that,

Projects must be designed in such a way that they are supported by soft technologies that help to build local capacity and leadership, encourage community ownership and strengthen local social infrastructure and networks, and therefore build social capital. If these factors are neglected, the impacts of a CI initiative can be limited and short-lived. The negative impacts resulting from the failure of a community-focused CI initiative may spread so far as to have a flow-on detrimental effect on the community's social capital, thereby undermining not just the sustainability of the CI initiative, but the sustainability and resilience of the community as a whole

(Simpson, 2005, p.115).

The CNA approach to community learning acknowledges two main areas of consideration for all CI initiatives. Firstly, that learning is contextual and affected by the environment in which it occurs (Lave & Etienne, 1990; Boettcher, 2007). Creating spaces that enable citizens to participate in CI activities, projects and initiatives that contribute to community life in a positive and sustainable manner whilst actively encouraging participation in capacity building/community learning in ways that relate and contribute to community development goals and action is a fundamental part of the way we work. Secondly, social interaction is a crucial component of learning. Traditional community ICT training courses typically lack social or community contextualization and are often heavily influenced by performance measurement and the target demands of funders. Training is often task oriented and shaped by a model of passive ICT consumption whereas community (ICT) learning is intended to empower learners with knowledge for change and is shaped by community development principles (Gilchrist & Rauf, 2006).

In previous CNA projects (funded research) we have encouraged community participants of Participatory Learning Workshops (PLWs) to generate their own learning contexts (Day & Farenden, 2007a). Learner-generated contexts are created by learners taking ownership of their learning needs and environments (Luckin, *et al*, 2007) by actively participating in dialogic learning networks in which information and knowledge are exchanged. In this way the learning processes produce effective, interesting and creative learning opportunities that are different on each occasion and from which the outcomes can be applied as, or to, effective community action. The next section of this paper reflects on emerging CNA processes and practices that we call community learning partnerships (CLPs).

Community learning partnerships

CLPs evolved as part of an ESRC funded participatory community ICT research project (Day, 2009; Day, 2008 and Day & Farenden, 2007b) in West Hove, UK. A subsequent smaller community needs assessment project in West Hove, funded by the Brighton & Sussex Community Knowledge Exchange (BSCKE) programme, resulted in a meeting with the Chairperson of the Portslade¹ Community Forum and the area's Community Development worker, which in turn led to an informal community partnership agreement to build and sustain a community website² with content of relevance to community activities and that supported community development in the area.

These community communication spaces (CCS) are built using the open source content management system (CMS) – Plone. All content is generated in partnership with community partners and sites develop at the speed and convenience of community engagement. That is to say that we do not populate the sites with content for our community partners, unless there is an urgent need for us to do, or we are showing people how to use the site as part of a participatory learning workshop (PLW). This means that sometimes site development is slow but it is worth remembering that all work is voluntary, as with most forms of community activity and if CCS are to become sustainable components of community communication ecologies then they must be owned and grown by the communities themselves. We support our community partners in their community learning but we try to avoid *doing things for them*, as external service providers or experts.

Our motivation is the empowerment that comes from communities learning to do things for themselves. This is never the same in any one community and at times can be frustrating on both sides. The first 3 years of working with the community in West Hove, for example, were a steep

¹ Portslade neighbours West Hove on the boundaries of Brighton & Hove

² Community communication space

learning curve, especially as most of this our work during this period was conducted without the involvement of the community development worker and forum. We certainly made a number of mistakes that we might not have done had we collaborated with them earlier. Of all the experiences during this time, of all the lessons learnt, the most significant relate to community engagement, developing partnerships and building trust³.

These lessons were important because when the ESRC funding ran out at the end of the first project a significant contributor, it was trust on both sides that underpinned our relationship with the community and enabled us to find a way of continuing our involvement. It would have been easy for us, as academic partners, to have walked away but ethics and social responsibility come into play and too many academic researchers engage with communities only to disappear when the money runs out and/or the research has no further use for them. This was a time for reflection among the university-based element of the CNA group. We were lucky in that we were able to secure a small pot of funding for the BSCKE project, which enabled us to fund one part-time researcher that kept us ticking over whilst we developed an alternative plan of involvement. Unfortunately, the funding available for the new project meant that our community ICT practitioner had to move on to pastures new and our technical advisor, the one who convinced us to use Plone, moved to a university in Canada – which created no end of technological problems for us! At a stroke the academic side of the CNA group was reduced to a part-time researcher⁴ and an academic lecturer,⁵ who was just about to return to a massive teaching load in a School that really did not understand, or value, the work being done. For a while, things looked grim for CNA.

However, we still had a number of assets that we could count on. 1) The commitment of the 2 remaining staff was unquestionable, and since our part-time researcher, Clair Farenden, has since moved on to a great job in Brighton & Hove Community and Voluntary Sector Forum, it would be remiss not to acknowledge the fantastic work she did in keeping the CNA vision going during a very difficult period. 2) The community development workers in West Hove and Portslade bought into the vision around this time and a reciprocal friendship and working relationship has developed from this common ground. 3) The enthusiasm, thirst for knowledge and the commitment of the Portslade Community Forum folk, together with 4) a great bunch of students (see contributors to this paper to name a few) over the past 2 years has meant that a new range of community informatics/media possibilities have emerged. Possibilities, inspired also it should be said in no small part by the great example set by the CI Corps at University of Illinois – see for example the Ask, Investigate, Create, Discuss & Reflect model (Nelson & Bishop, 2007). As we reflected on how such assets could be utilised to develop and sustain our existing community partnership activities – let alone respond to the demand to build new partnerships⁶ – a creative, flexible and innovative idea about community learning partnerships began to emerge.

We started by linking the goal of informal community learning partnerships to the formal framework of higher education pedagogy. This took the form of service learning,⁷ or community-based modules,

³ A detailed paper reflecting on some of the lessons drawn from the participatory CI research and development of the CNA project will be prepared for JoCI later this year.

⁴ Clair Farenden

⁵ Peter Day

⁶ Earlier this summer we were approached by the community development worker from the neighbourhood of Moulsecoomb to explore ways in which community informatics/media might support community development activities there.

Moulsecoomb is one of the most socially excluded communities in the South-east of England and a number of introductory PLWs will be held in September 2009. We have also been approached by a partnership in sustainable development in rural communities to explore ways in which the CNA model of community learning, networking and technology can be utilised to support their activities.

⁷ We use *community-based* learning rather than *service* to describe the modules. The term *service* has connotations of benefactors *doing to* beneficiaries, when we wish to focus on partnerships of learning and development.

intended to improve the quality of community life and informal learning of community partners and the formal learning and social knowledge of the students (Abravanel, 2003 & McPherson, 2005) through community informatics/media partnership projects. In these partnership projects the intended purpose is that “both sides benefit through the activities, and usually involves having a shared vision, regular two-way communication, independent tasks, and common goals” (Billig, 2007, p.27).

Achieving a shared vision and common ground between students, staff, community members and community development workers is no easy task. The issues and experiences that arise from facilitating and sustaining community-based learning partnerships are multitudinous and would form the basis of a paper in their own right. For now, it suffices to acknowledge the complexity and labour intensive nature of this task. It should be acknowledged however, that mutually beneficial community informatics/media and learning partnership projects – planned, designed and implemented to address locally articulated needs require an ongoing dialogue between student and community partners from the initial engagement to the completion of the project if both sides are to benefit and learn from the partnership activities and processes.

Discussing the nature of reciprocity in community-based learning, Stafford, Boyd & Lindner emphasise the significance of experiential learning and reflection in achieving unique learning experiences (2003). Although the focus of their discussion is directed more at the student experience than that of the community partners, the authors do acknowledge the “reciprocal learning experience between them [student] and the community (p.2). Whilst the points made by Stafford, Boyd & Lindner are important it is important to understand that reciprocal learning does not necessarily mean that learning experiences are the same for all participants or that they gain the same knowledge.

For community partners much of the learning focuses on the processes outlined above (see Nielsen and Packham). Of course, there is also an element of skills development in which students share their knowledge, experience and expertise as part of the project brief. In this way not only are the capacities of our community partners developed⁸ so that they can apply these new skills in achieving a community action goal but they can also assist others in the community to develop their capacities also. Capacity building in the community informatics context is both practice and process oriented and should always be driven by community development goals.

For students, learning goals are driven primarily by the demands of the module/course assessment criteria. In other words they want to gain a good grade in the module and so seek to gain knowledge about the synergies between community media/informatics practices and community development related theories. Of course they soon start to realise that they also learn about themselves and other people – often in environments they have never encountered before. They learn about community, civil society, civic responsibility, project management, negotiation and dialogue. They also learn about learning, often gaining insights about themselves from the challenges they have faced. From this point forward many gain in confidence and their overall performance improves – not just in these modules/course but across the board.

All community informatics/media modules in the School of Arts and Media at the University of Brighton are electives and most run for a single semester but final year undergraduate students can enrol for the community project module, as well as selecting to undertake a piece of applied community-based research as their dissertation subject. This means that some students dedicate 50% of their final year studies to community informatics/media related subjects. The same applies at Masters, where students can take a theory-based module and then supplement that with a practice

⁸ We will explore some of the practical examples of this in a CI context in the next section.

based community media module before undertaking their dissertation as community-based research.

Because these elective modules all form part of Media Studies degrees the range of skills, knowledge and interests found among students is wide but highly appropriate in supporting community content production – photography, video, journalism, PR, marketing, html, image editing, and digital storytelling are among the subjects in which students having assisted community partners in learning. Of course, as with all student work, quality varies. Sometimes the outcomes are excellent and students make significant contributions to community learning, capacity building and community development. On other occasions the outputs are not so good and students act more like community helpers requiring a lot of supervision and assistance from our community partners. This is fully understood and accepted by the community partners. In the main however, the partnership work well and even the less dynamic and innovative students manage to contribute to community activities in some way and learn from the process at the same time.

A model of community learning partnerships – as if people mattered

Fundamental to the success of the community learning partnerships is dialogic action. That is to say that each stage of the learning partnership process (below) is driven by actions and activities determined by regular and ongoing dialogue between community, students, community development workers and academic staff (faculty). This is crucial in order to achieve and maintain shared vision and common ground within the partnerships (Billig, 2007) although establishing an environment in which people with busy lives and competing external demands can come together in dialogue is not always practicable but can be made easier through ICT platforms.

Having tried and failed with internal educational platforms, we experimented with NING, a social networking site. Students adopted it readily because of its similarities to Facebook and MySpace whilst allowing them to keep ‘work’ and ‘social’ uses separate. It also has the huge advantage of avoiding firewall and internal security problems encountered when trying to enable community access to University information systems. In principle, there is no reason why we should not be able to use the CMS platform Plone in the near future. This would have the added advantage of people (students and community) only having to learn one new platform. We will trial this during one of the elective modules in the next academic year. The remainder of this paper will now explore the stages of the CLP model by focussing on student/community partnership activities.

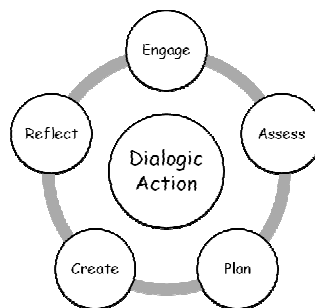


Fig. 1 - Stages of the community learning partnership (CLP) process

Engage

Community informatics partnership projects vary year on year and are determined by a number of factors. Student skill-set, knowledgebase and interests (groups or individuals) play a determining

role in the type of projects undertaken but all projects must be driven by community need. Students are free to identify and negotiate the nature and aims of projects for themselves, so long as they are located within one of our partnering communities. However, because most modules/courses only run for a 12 week period, projects are normally drawn from a list drawn prepared through discussions with community development workers and the community forum. Initial student engagement with potential community partners usually comes through an introduction to the community development worker and/or Chairperson of the community forum, usually as part of an informal get together where the potential for project collaboration is explored. Subsequent negotiations between students and community hammer out an agreement on the nature and goals of the project. This is never as simple as it might sound and this year a digital story-telling project provided a classic example of this. We received an invitation from the manager of the North Portslade Children's Centre to facilitate a digital story-telling project in which parents could tell their stories about issues and problems of parenting in Portslade, which would then be loaded up onto the Portslade CCS on pages dedicated to the Centre.

Of course, a Children's Centre, where children run around enjoying themselves (noisily) and parents socialise with one eye on their offspring is not really an environment conducive to running participatory learning workshops in digital story-telling techniques. In addition, the parents did not really understand why the students were there, except that it had 'something to do with ICT'. The students not only had to completely revise their plans for the digital story workshops (more later) but had to develop a strategy by which they could engage with parents and convince them to engage with the project. Initially the students met with a mixed response. There was some interest but people really didn't understand the concept of digital story-telling. When the students returned to university we reflected critically on the experiences of the day considering what we'd learnt about the student's preparation for the visit and whether the assumptions about the project that they had taken to the Centre were valid. This was a useful session and the students returned to the Centre the following week with visual display boards to show what a digital story was and how to story-board (script) the story. The boards were designed to be eye catching and attract interest. They also took a laptop with a short story they had made playing on loop. Throughout the morning interest grew and people signed up to *engage* in the project.

Assess

Although much of the partnership projects focus on content production, the intension is that content should be uploaded and managed on the community website (CCS). In Portslade, initial discussions about CCS structure and content have to date focussed on the information and communication needs of the Portslade Community Forum. Eventually, it is hoped that the site will be expanded to act as a community communication space for the entire Portslade community, however. With this in mind a group of final year media students undertook a community *needs assessment* in the centre of Portslade. A random sample of 250 people was surveyed. The results provided some interesting insights into ICT access and use by demographics in Portslade. The questionnaire confirmed interest in the development of an effective community website and provided data about community content requirements. The results of the survey were written up in a community friendly and accessible report form. This will be posted on the CCS and produced in hard copy for distribution among groups in the forum. The students undertook similar research in West Hove with outputs tailored to meet the needs of that community.

Plan

Planning a project takes time and requires ongoing dialogue between partners. An example of the variety of ways that such dialogue can be sustained is by making it useful to the community partners. During interviews with key stakeholders from the community forum, students introduced the finding

from the needs assessment. Reflecting critically on the findings it was resolved that an awareness raising campaign was needed in the community if the CCS was to contribute to community development by becoming a thriving space for community communications. Analysing both the survey and interview findings for indicators of community needs the students produced a 'toolkit' for raising community awareness of the CCS. The purpose behind creating such a resource was to inform the community forum in their deliberations and assist in the planning of future community information and communications strategies. By drawing on the findings outlined in the research report the students have produced a range of recommendations that will inform the next tranche of PLWs and support community awareness raising activities.

Having identified the priorities articulated by the community in the questionnaire and interviews, the students produced a series of 'how to' work books. Each work book introduces new community users to the initial stages of using the Plone based community website – e.g. how to become a member; how to create a personal and/or group folder and pages; how to create a community calendar event; and how to create a community news article. Using screen shots to accompany the written guidelines, users are taken step-by-step through each introductory stage of using the community website as a content producer rather than a passive service user. The purpose behind workbook production and dissemination was to provide a resource that *empowered* community users to produce and manage their own online information and communications, albeit at introductory level in this instance. To this end, workbooks will be posted on the CCS as community learning resources.

Create

Community media/informatics practices can, when applied as part of a community development portfolio of organisation, activities and action, unleash a creative potential, often unrealised in the pressures of everyday life. It is one of the most wonderful things about working with people in communities that quite ordinary people are capable of quite extraordinary things when given the support and confidence to have a go and achieve. For example, parents from the North Portslade Children's Centre produced 4 digital stories, some intended to be used to raise awareness of and profile the Centre itself and another about the activities at the community allotment. One parent, who joined the project near its end, was considering using the techniques she's learnt to produce a story about coping with childhood Eczema for other parents.

During their time at the Children's Centre the two students overcame considerable odds to plan and implement an effective community learning environment. They engaged with parents in a friendly and helpful manner which stimulated their desire to participate in learning how to represent and promote *community voice* through the medium of digital stories. All parents when subsequently questioned revealed that they would use the skills they had acquired in both their personal lives and to support the community if and when the need arose. This amounts to a considerable accessible community knowledgebase, as the students showed parents how to storyboard and create narrative for stories. They also provided an introduction to digital photography using Photo Voice techniques and parents were then shown how to synthesise this knowledge into the production of a digital story by using Windows Movie Maker.

On another project, a pair of students planned and executed a PLW in which community leaders learnt how to edit digital images and then how to create posters to promote and advertise community events and activities using Photoshop. In both sets of workshop environments, participants reflected critically how the knowledge they were gaining could be used to support their community, indeed a number of posters have subsequently been produced in support of community events in West Hove and Portslade. In both the Photoshop and digital story projects students produced 'how to' workbooks to be used as a community resource in the future.

Reflect

It is important to note that despite the representation in Fig.1 reflection does not only occur at the end of a project, although critical evaluation by students and community at this stage is especially important for development purposes for an ongoing initiative such as the CLPs. As we've sought to illustrate throughout this section, critical reflection by partners is encouraged and undertaken throughout each project stage. Sometimes this takes the form of simple conversations whilst at other times, the reflective dialogue is more thorough and ongoing, this is where project communication platforms have proven useful, although using them effectively can be a bit of a challenge, when students eager to impress their assessors with their diligence by creating masses of unnecessary content/postings.

Conclusion

The most significant results of the CLPs lie in the support they give to the argument that ICT can be utilized in ways that empower individuals and communities alike. These results are not hugely significant in their social contribution but they do illustrate that this empowerment can lead to a number of beneficial factors ranging from improved democracy as a result of voices being heard to a sense of achievement for participants, which can result in further confidence and further community involvement. This research also embodies an underlying support to the argument that digital exclusion can be narrowed, albeit to a small extent, by digital stories and Community Informatics projects that enable community members to implement them effectively.

When viewed through a community development lens the application of community informatics practices can contribute to both community empowerment and community learning – truly a double-edged sword! This paper has illustrated that by taking small steps, engaging with communities in their own environments in ways that meet community needs and collaborating with community groups and community development workers, community informatics practices show how power “can be accessed by everyone in local communities” (DCLG, 2008).

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