

SKILLING SENIORS IN COMPUTERS: COMMUNITY TRAINING RESPONSES TO THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

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Abstract: As computers pervade further the lives of older adults the need for relevant affordable training grows. Older adults, not through frailty or age but because accessing training can be difficult, do experience the digital divide sharply. The intent of this paper is to suggest successful ways of teaching computers through the discussion of a case study of Skylarkers 60 and Better Program and a longitudinal study conducted there. Centre managers can benefit from knowing the types of teaching methods that may make their computer training beneficial and useful to older adults.

Key Words: Digital Divide, training, mentoring, computers

Implications for Practice:

- Teaching practice examples show how to respond appropriately to older adult computer issues
- Putting time and effort into selecting the best tutors is vital to building good working relationships between students, tutors and staff
- Reassuring older adults that they are progressing with often complex computer software applications is a vital strategy to encouraging them to persist with learning computers
- It is not just about affordable lesson costs but being aware older adults are keen to learn computer skills and with the best resources possible tailoring the lessons to support this

Introduction

As more information is placed on the internet and technology continues to pervade more aspects of everyday life, older adults still struggle with using computers. In Australia older adult's internet use has increased 40% at home by ages 65 to 74, suggesting they are using the internet more than ever (Australian Bureau of Statistics, 2008). Yet the digital divide, the gap between individuals and their opportunities to access information and communication technologies and the internet (Organisation for Economic Co-Operation and Development, 2001), is prevalent in many industrial economies. The key for older adults to overcome this divide lies in affordable and relevant teaching of computer and internet skills. This is achievable through community centres offering training and supportive tuition.

Skylarkers 60 and Better Computer Skilling Program

Skylarkers 60 and Better Program is a healthy active aging program located in Inala, a suburb of Brisbane Queensland in Australia. Its mission is to enable older adults in the local community to participate in decisions and activities which affect their health and well-being (Skylarkers, 2009). Skylarkers main goals are to increase the skills and awareness of older people in relation to lifestyle options, and to decrease their social isolation. Learning computer and internet skills is one way to keep older adults active in an increasingly technological society. DiMaggio and Hargittai (2001) stated criteria relevant to older adults and use of information and communication technologies. These include: inequalities in access to the internet, extent of use of search strategies, quality of technical connections and social support and the ability to evaluate the quality of information on the internet. Skylarkers aims to address these issues with older adults in the local community.

Computer lessons began in 1996 and are taught by volunteer tutors. Lessons are one-on-one but periodically the centre runs an introduction to computers course called 'Computers for the Absolutely Terrified'. Microsoft Word and Excel, hardware issues, internet and email use and computer virus eradication advice are the most frequent topics requested for training. More complex projects such as compiling family trees, which involved the use of databases and photo editing, were also taught on request. Older adult learners are also increasingly curious about social networking sites, such as Facebook, and how to join and manage them.

Tutors have been of all ages sourced from the community and as work experience students. Some came from the information technology sector, gaining the benefits of working with older people and developing empathy for older learner's needs. This fills a social and personal need for the older adult as they built a relationship with their computer tutor. As Russell (2007) observed older adult computer learners want connectedness in their lives and seek to feel part of a changing society. Skylarkers computer tuition lessons for older adults offer obtaining the technical computer skills and the ability to feel connectedness to others that technology can potentially bring.

Study Objective and Methods

The study's objective was to discover why the older learner's computer lesson retention rate was consistently high since 1996 with learners continuing lessons over many years, much similar to an earlier older learner computer study conducted by White and Weatherall (2000). We asked the question "what accounts for continued attendance at the centre's computer lessons?". The methods we used to collect the data were observations of lessons over 3 years

followed by a sample set of 15 semi-structured interviews. This generated much qualitative data and insights into the thoughts and views of the older adult learners. In order to analyse the data we used Strauss and Corbin's (1990) Grounded Theory methods. Categories were formed from the field note and interview data which suggested what was occurring at the centre's computer lessons. Once these categories were analysed and compared against each other for consistency a theory emerged to suggest a primary reason why older adults continue their computer lessons.

Why Do Older Adults Continue Computer Lessons?

Our main finding was that high retention rates were a direct result of the tutor's style of teaching and building of tutor learner relationships. The tutors took a problem-solving approach to training where older learners' individual computer learning problems were addressed. Like Mayhorn et al (2004) advise, the goals of the older learner must determine lesson content and to what degree the learner wishes to pursue a topic. When the learner is shown how to solve a computer issue they often became curious about knowing more about the topic and feel they have overcome an issue and learnt something useful.

The centre's tutor-older learner interaction, the manner in which tutors taught, was crucial in retaining students. Older adults valued tutor qualities such as patience, willingness to repeat procedures and reassure them when they felt they were doing something wrong. Therefore, the tutors approach was to build a professional but supportive relationship with their students. Other tutors made contact with each other's students so that if one tutor was away the older learner would feel comfortable with another tutor. We concluded that at Skylarkers older learners came back for lessons for one major and important reason. That reason was tutors built a supportive student tutor relationship and centre management supported both tutors and students with the physical computer and human resources so older adults could explore more computer topics.

Study Examples

In this section, we provide field note data from the observations and extracts from interviews. These will show the types of teaching techniques and interactions that account for the claim that the centre builds relationships through the support, encouragement and patience displayed by tutors. We provide five examples from the data to illustrate some of the perceived successful student tutor interactions. Tutors and older adult learners have had their names changed to protect their identity.

Example 1- Field Note Observation:

In this example the student had a new internet service provider. The tutor discussed issues about installing anti-virus software and if her grandchildren load programs. He cautioned her about others using her computer for their own purposes:

John: "Do you have an anti virus program on your computer?"

Doris: "I don't know."

Doris needed to install a firewall on her broadband internet (as John advised).

John advised to use a firewall. John clicked on start bar and explained it was a menu. He then moved the mouse over each part of the menu and explained what each item did.

John: "I'll take you through the mouse first."

John asked if Doris has a shortcut to Word on desktop, "I think so." She said.

Doris: "The kids play games." (computer games).

John advised if her kids load games onto her computer it should not be a problem but to be careful. John: "It depends where they got it (the games) from."

Example 2 - Field Note Observation:

This example shows Adam the tutor solving a problem Brad had with email attachments and files on a CD ROM. Adam persisted in looking for solutions to the problem, to which Brad exclaimed that he was very happy with Adam explaining why things were not working as Brad expected them to:

Brad clicked on Outlook Express 6. Brad could not copy picture, he tried to right click on picture. Adam showed him how to save as a JPEG. Adam showed Brad how to open attachments, clicking on the security tab in Windows XP. Adam remarked it was a common problem in XP not being able to open attachments.

Brad then put a CD ROM into the CPU drive. Windows did not recognise .WPP files. Adam showed Brad how to correct this and open the program. "New icon" it was previously not recognising Serif files. The icons change. Brad remarked "isn't that delightful" Adam said to Brad "you a genius".

Adam suggested using the knowledge from today's lesson straight away.

Example 3 - Interview Extract:

The student was satisfied with the lessons because he wanted to build a website and was having financial issues with photograph reproductions. His tutor found a way to solve the issue and save the student more expense; in turn the student was impressed with the tutor's tenacity to solve his computer issue:

Interviewee: Very impressed. It encouraged me to keep going because you know when you took some of these photographs to look at them you think oh that's too far gone you know I'd love to be able to use but their just beyond repair but now I realise we can do something with them. I had one family photograph computer enhanced at Days Road. One photograph cost me one hundred and ten dollars. A hundred and ten dollars for one photograph. Magnificent job that was done on it. But I couldn't afford to do all of these that I got here today with that sort of price tag, I just couldn't afford to do it but what we've done with the help of the tutor here is restored some of these photographs, not the computer enhanced quality, but to a useable quality.

Example 4 - Interview Extract:

The digital divide has caused displacement in society which older adults experience if family and friends are geographically distant. In this interview the student comments on how the tutor's training in Paltalk, an online audio chat program, had motivated him to contact people in Germany:

Interviewee: I enjoy writing I do a lot of correspondence, I do a lot of e-mail work. Lately I've been chatting, I like chatting to people but on a private basis, you know, I've got a microphone on my system and I talk to people in Germany, mainly Germany which is great if it's only for the fact one hears the different dialects in different parts of the country. And I was put onto that here by Skylarkers through Paltalk, you know, which gave me an insight of the possibilities and joy of it that it can bring and the downfalls if it doesn't work.

Example 5 - Interview Extract:

The last extract represented the overall positive responses from the sampled interviewees where the tutors were praised for their efforts. If any negative feedback arose the issue was addressed, however, in this study the students reported tutors solved their computer issues in a friendly, co-operative manner:

Interviewer: What's your overall opinion of the tutors, whether it be one individual you want to comment on or the whole of the group, it doesn't matter, but the point is, what is your opinion of the tutors at Skylarkers overall?

Interviewee: Well they're mostly pretty happy-go-lucky fellas and that puts you at ease straight away. If they all seem to be quite with what they're doing and the vibes are passed onto you, when your learning, if they're happy with what they're doing well you certainly pick up the vibes that they're happy with what they're doing and they're happy to be there doing what they do.

Implications for Managers Adopting Computer Lessons

Overcoming the digital divide will become a continuous priority for staff and managers working with older people in voluntary sectors. The study suggests that putting time and effort into selecting suitable tutors with particular skills in teaching older learners is valuable. Each tutor needs to have skills in appropriately teaching older adults, including empathy and patience, as well as the ability to build a learning relationship over long periods. Centre managers should be supportive of tutors and students through offering updated resources and ensuring tutors are capable of understanding the needs of older adult users.

The centre's computer lessons strive to overcome the technical issues of information technology, such as use of software, internet knowledge, hardware issues and communicating through electronic media. Yet the centre's tutors also offer social support and reassurance to those who come to lessons. Although tutors did leave the centre to pursue other projects, most stayed for a long period. The older learners report they enjoy coming to lessons not just to learn but to spend time with their current, and future, tutors. This form of social support is important because many educational institutions cannot offer the interpersonal skills sought by older adult learners.

Skylarker's computer lessons play a part in bridging the digital divide that affects older adults. Though paying attention to the types of people that can teach older adults computer skills, this encourages the learner to continue exploring technology. In turn, having the skills and awareness to use computers, combined with low cost training, contributes to the lessening of the digital divide amongst older adults. Centre Managers of any place that agree to take on computer lessons will benefit if they carefully select those tutors that are willing to use the types of skills and possess the qualities this study suggests encourages older learners to repeatedly return for lessons.

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