

Empowering the Info-Poor: The Community Computing Center Movement

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"In a large, airy room there is a crowd of young people and adults all working at computers. In one group students are having their first experience using a spreadsheet on an IBM PC. At the same time, in another corner, a senior adult is teaching herself to use a database on an IBM PC.

A young man is updating the church's membership files and printing mailing labels. A young woman is at the Macintosh working on a desktop publishing project, and two teenagers are in another corner debating how best to make the logo Turtle do what they want it to do. Others are casually 'messaging about with simulations. They are all using these technologies to achieve their own personal goals and objectives."

The "community computer center" movement is part of the larger community technology movement in general, and is reflected in the growing trend among community-based organizations, social service agencies, churches, and community centers for acquiring and integrating computers into their programs.

Just as schools, libraries, museums and summer camps in our more well-to-do communities are acquiring and developing computer components and resources, so, too, are day care programs, Boys and Girls Clubs, YMCA's, and other indigenous low-income community agencies and centers, albeit, as in everything else, with severely restricted finances. The entire field of employment and training itself is increasingly coming to be defined in computer skills terms. The community computing movement bridges generations. Recreation, support, and training programs for seniors are seeking out computer resources, too

No wonder. Computers are powerful tools for helping individuals from many disadvantaged groups. Adult literacy students gain confidence and facility in reading and writing English through use of the word processor. Unemployed workers prepare resumes and cover letters and learn and improve keyboarding, business applications and systems skills for re-entering the job market. After-school and day care children learn how useful and fun computer applications can be. Participants of all ages improve their communications, writing, keyboarding and literacy skills and gain knowledge of the world and others through growing telecommunications options - online chats, email and pen pals, contributing, posting and commenting on essays and stories, and working on joint projects frequently involving graphics and desktop publishing.

As computers become more and more ubiquitous, their appearance among programs and agencies, which serve primarily poor people, is part of their "natural" development. Yet it is a movement, too, which is guided by the radical democratic egalitarian principle that basic tools of daily life need to be accessible to everyone.

PLAYING TO WIN

This radical and self-conscious philosophy is most articulate among those programs, which have established community-computing centers in a deliberate fashion. Among these, one of the most developed is Playing to Win (PTW), a 13 year-old nonprofit headquartered in Harlem. PTW is nationally recognized as a pioneer and leading advocate of equitable access to computer-based technologies. The Harlem Center provides a range of computer-based learning and playing opportunities. In 1990, the National Science Foundation provided PTW with funding to help establish a network of 30 centers across the eastern United States. There are currently centers in New York, Boston, Washington D.C., Pittsburgh, Philadelphia, and Jacksonville, Florida. The scene depicted at the beginning of this article comes from the Staff and Volunteer Handbook for PTW's Washington affiliate, Future Center, the community technology lab at the Capital Children's Museum.

PTW is established on the principles that technology is a tool to help participants achieve their own goals; students work together as much as individually and learn as much from play as from work. Teachers are facilitator, resources and participants in the learning process. Curriculum is project-based. Playing to Win founder Antonia Stone is coauthor of, among other books and articles, *The Neuter Computer*, designed to help educators, parents, students, teachers, trainers and policy-makers overcome the computer gender gap, and *Keystrokes to Literacy*, which shows how to integrate computer with traditional literacy.

This focused and developed philosophy helps define the Harlem and Washington centers which are complex and sophisticated, and it helps more modestly-sized and financed programs make a substantial impact, too.

BOSTON'S EXAMPLE

"Recognizing that in our increasingly technological society, people who are socially and economically disadvantaged will become even further disadvantaged if they lack access to computers and computer-based technologies," the Technology Education Council of Somerville, Massachusetts, was formed in August 1959. The Technology Education Council established local control and management of the Somerville Community Computer Center (SCCC). SCCC provides residents of all ages' access to computer-based technology, which they would not otherwise have.

With active support from the city's Adult Education program known as SCALE (the Somerville Center for Adult Learning Experiences), the Community Action Agency of Somerville, Apple Computer, and PTW, the SCCC provides low-income Somerville residents with access to equipment, training and technical assistance. SCCC serves as the computer facility for adult education and human service programs in the Somerville Community Service Center building.

Programs include employment and training; ESL, ABE, and GED programs; during- and after-school programs for the Community Schools and the Powderhouse public elementary school next door; and other programs for Head Start and Even Start students, teachers, parents, and

staff. Elderly participants from the Council on Aging also use the center. The Mystic Learning Center Teen Program, Elizabeth Peabody House Day Care and the Open Center for Children, Short Stop Youth Shelter, and Somerville/Cambridge Elder Services come over to the SCCC to use its technology

One of the hallmarks of community computing center philosophy and service is open access hours for the general public where anyone in the community can come to, use and get help using equipment, software and peripherals. The SCCC has provided six sessions totaling 14 hours a week of this access and support on Apple tie, Macintosh and IBM-compatible platforms over the last two years. SCCC serves as a useful model and training ground. A \$2 donation is generally requested but no one is ever turned away because of financial hardship.

Elsewhere in the Boston area, the United South End Settlements has a Computer Resource Center, which serves all the programs in the Harriet Tubman House as well as such groups as Jewish Vocational Services and the computer literacy and access program for Project Place. Project Place is an adult day shelter, which serves as the magnet program for all the homeless shelters in the Greater Boston Adult Shelter Alliance. The Roxbury Family YMCA has an established computer lab, too, which serves all its programs and provides a key component for its summer camp. The Roxbury YMCA recently collaborated with the Boston Computer Exchange, a local used- computer reseller, in providing more than 40 families with double disk drive clones for less than \$100. Boston's famed Computer Museum has just opened a Club House, geared to 10 to 15 year-old low-income youth, with special multi-media resources in virtual reality, robotics, music, desktop publishing and game design.

Community computing centers extend well beyond the PTW network. In just the Boston area, La Alianza Hispana and the Dorchester YMCA have major labs, which serve their communities. Freedom House has an expansive lab of DEC and Macintosh equipment which serves not only all of its agency programs, but is also the facility for an independent business-training program as well.

The Cambridge-based Lotus Development Corporation's Philanthropy Program and the Boston Foundation have funded the Greater Boston Community Technology Access TV and, in collaboration with the Boston Computer Society, provides training to public access TV participants in Deluxe Paint III on its Amigas for the production of short animations for broadcast. Cambridge Community Project. This project supports all of these programs as well as over two dozen special projects involving various Boys and Girls Clubs, unions, immigrant organizations, Survival News (the official newspaper of the National Welfare Rights Organization), and homeless organizations. Staff, board and volunteers with community computing centers have provided key personnel for the first three Boston Computer Society (BCS) and CPSR-sponsored New England Conferences on Computers and Social Change.

A NATIONAL MOVEMENT

The scene in Boston is being replicated to various degrees all across the country. Community computing centers frequently work closely with PC user groups as well as CPSR chapters since they have a strong need to rely on the volunteer support of those with computer skills.

Computers and You, the lab-based project of Glide Memorial Church in San-Francisco, is frequently looked to as a model. The North Texas PC Users' Group has helped establish a network of community computing centers in Dallas. The Clerical Skills Training Program of the Metacenter YMCA in Seattle teaches clerical, computer and employment skills to low- income youth. The Association of Personal Computer Users Groups (APCUG) is working with the computer industry in presenting REACH Awards to Recognize Exceptional Achievement in Community Help and publishes a national resource guide of community computing projects.

THE WIDER COMMUNITY TECHNOLOGY MOVEMENT

As part of the wider community technology movement, community-computing centers are starting to receive attention from local community access television stations. The SCCC has close relations with Somerville Community Access TV and, in collaboration with the Boston Computer Society, provides training to public access TV participants in Deluxe Paint III on its Amigas for the production of short animations for broadcast. Cambridge Community Television is a few doors down from the BCS, and Malden and Lowell cable access are both in the process of developing computer components.

Last year's December issue of Community Television Review was dedicated to computer resources projects. CTR is the publication of the Alliance for Community Media, formerly the National Federation of Local Cable Programmers. The organizational name change and its expanded focus are solid indicators of where all the talk about the convergence of cable, data and the telephone is going. We can certainly anticipate that the future will see the development of community technology centers.

NO EASY ROAD

Community computing centers face many obstacles. What kind of equipment should be acquired? What kind of software? How do we get it? How do we integrate the technology into ongoing agency programs? How do we develop public access components? How do we develop funding sources; establish a support or advisory board; and recruit and train volunteers?

However serious these obstacles, community-computing centers do hold enormous promise and provide a unique volunteer opportunity. If you're interested in helping out, find out what your local PTW affiliate, Boys and Girls Club, Y or community center is doing. Or contact your local CPSR chapter or computer users group. There are lots to do. By the very fact of belonging to CPSR, CPSR members indicate a special combination of skills and interests.

Your assistance on the front lines can make a crucial difference.

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