

# Strand 4: Networked Learning in Community Development

Paper 6:

## Issues in Developing the Networked Community: The Perspective of Members of Community Groups.

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### Summary

- This paper explores some of the issues in developing networked communities. It begins with a background to some recent initiatives and is followed by a description of a short course on using the Internet which was offered to members of community groups in Sheffield. The paper describes and discusses aspects of the experiences of the course participants. Members of the course enjoyed taking part in on-line discussion but found constraints in contributing. They also enjoyed looking at WWW sites but found that their initial enthusiasm wore off. However course members did feel a sense of achievement in designing their own web pages - a process which was quite time consuming. I draw out four implications from this case study:
- Internet skills are relatively straight forward to acquire but not always easy to use in authentic context;
- access to discussion is the key to community networking even if there are significant constraints on taking part in on-line debate;
- virtual communities will not replace face to face meetings;
- national and international on-line networks of interest groups may develop more readily than those based on geographical proximity.

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## Background

- In recent years there has been growing interest in the idea of using new technologies to develop networked communities. (One starting point to explore UK initiatives is UK Communities on Line at <http://www.communities.org.uk/>.) Williams has found over 20 UK community network projects and over 350 UK local authorities with web sites (Williams 1997), and McDonald and Malina (1997), Ennals (1997), Astil (1997), Fraser (1997), and Walker (1997) report on five examples of community projects. In North America there is a longer history of networked communities with Douglas Schuler as one of its most enthusiastic supporters, (Schuler 1996.)

There is no one definition of community networking. The word 'community' may say as much about shared interests (eg a community of learners) as much as contiguous geographical location. Even when community networks are based on very definite physical boundaries there are different issues associated with developing networks in rural areas as compared, say, to inner cities, and indeed within specific localities of an inner city. A distinction also needs to be made between projects which seem more concerned with access to information (this seems particularly the case with initiatives supported by government and libraries) and those which promote access to communication (eg Civinets characterised by the development of many to many forums). Another fundamental distinction can be made between optimists, eg Schuler, and more cautious commentators who recall the high hopes which have accompanied past community initiatives such as cable television, community video and local radio (Malina and Jankowski (1996) provide a useful review of some of the issues posed here).

Despite these divergences there are two common threads in the arguments for community networks. Firstly, a worry that local democratic participation in both formal and informal activities has declined, and will be further undermined, as information and decision making becomes concentrated within large corporations and national or transnational institutions. Secondly, and given more prominence, is that without 'capacity building' in economically disadvantaged areas whole regions or districts will

enter a spiral of low skills, low access to information and low investment. Perhaps inevitably, this implies a 'top down' approach with professionals and enthusiasts promoting networks in contexts where most people do not have access to the Internet and are unsure what they would use it for.

## Sheffield

- Now indelibly associated with the film 'The Full Monty', Sheffield was badly hit by the economic restructuring of the 1970's and 1980's with over 40 000 jobs lost in the steel industry alone (Hoogvelt and Freeman, 1996). In recent years the city has been given a facelift with large infrastructure and lottery supported projects. However the city still lacks inward investment and Hoogvelt and Freeman calculate its GDP as three quarters of the national average.

As in other cities, there have been some local networking initiatives (see for example the Networked Users Forum at <http://www.shef.ac.uk/~nuf/> and the Open Information Project at <http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/projects/oip/scu/>). The city's two universities and some local schools and colleges have been supportive of community networking and have hosted pages and supported projects. However leaving aside those with access at work, and in particular through the JANET network at the universities, less than one per cent of people in Sheffield have Internet connections. So what hope is there for community networking in Sheffield and what would local people expect to get from it?

This paper explores some of the issues by reporting on a short course which aimed to support members of community groups to get started using the Internet. I wanted to see what local people who had some interest in new technologies and who were already involved in community projects would make of the idea of community networking. In this paper I briefly describe the course which I offered; discuss the experiences of participants (based on in depth interviews) and draw out four issues in the development of community networks.

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## The course

- The course ran from September to January 1997 as an evening class with seven sessions of two hourly meetings once a fortnight plus two further unscheduled sessions at the end of the course so that participants could finish off their web pages. (Further details of the course and its follow up can be found at <http://www.shef.ac.uk/uni/projects/jitol/cty/cty.htm>).

There were two major strands to the course: using the Internet for communication and using the Internet for information. The programme was weighted towards the use of WWW, with sessions on searching for information and authoring one's own web pages, but my intention was that the on-line discussion between meetings would redress the balance.

Twelve people attended the course from community groups which included a credit union; an environmental group; a parent- teachers association; two conservation groups and a youth group. Participants said they had joined the course through a general interest in the Internet and how it could be used in their voluntary organisation. For nearly everyone this was an exploration of possibilities. They had an open mind on the value of the Internet and were aware of the issues they would face in introducing change into their organisation.

Everyone on the course had some, but limited, experience of using Internet tools and one person had experience of on-line discussion lists before the course. Five people had e-mail access at work and used it occasionally, in three cases, or more regularly, in two cases. Out of these five people, three had to make a point to connect to the server and, in one case, to come from another office specially to use it. Where e-mail was being used at work this was largely for one - to - one communication, like a fax, or as a means for mailing information to small or large lists of people. It was not used for on-line discussion between colleagues.

## On-line messages

I had hoped that topics would emerge through introductions to the forum or through participants choosing to raise topics of their own. This did happen at times, for example, a short discussion about shopping and the impact of out of town shopping centres did get underway in response to one message. However, to kick start discussions, I gave out short readings for on-line debate at three of the meetings. One was a section from Schuler's book (Schuler op cit) which generated little discussion, another was a Channel Four booklet 'Get Netted' (1996) which although generated little discussion did lead some participants to contact other community groups, albeit with little response. A third text, a letter in the local paper complaining about the behaviour of students in Sheffield did generate more interest. In total 44 messages were sent to the group list and several more one - to - one messages between members of the list. Messages averaged around 250 words, this is including headers and footers. In style, messages were characterised by the participants themselves as 'informal'.

## Participants' Perspectives on the Internet for Community Groups

### WWW

In general participants enjoyed the sessions in which they looked at web sites, particularly because such extended on-line viewing was slow and expensive from home. No one experienced any significant difficulty navigating within Netscape and had found the buttons quite intuitive to use. The community sites I had referenced were looked at and discussed but participants soon started searching for their own sites of interest, associated with their community group or special interest. However, the initial enthusiasm for Web sites wore off. Several people raised the issue of the quality of information. One suggested that in a library there has been some selection process whereas on the World Wide Web anything can go in. Another participant had used the Web to find sites of interest and thought

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it helped if you had a specific enquiry but overall she was "fed up with amount of adverts and low quality stuff there is." And rather than putting the user in control she felt that hyper links were often there to lead the viewer from page to page in a pre-determined manner.

Several people commented that although search engines looked very effective, you could not narrow down inquiries sufficiently to get at what you were really interested in. The whole process was time consuming so you might spend several minutes downloading stuff you did not really want. This was echoed by one person who tried to use the search engines to find sites produced by children in other schools but after extensive searching she could not find any.

## Authoring

Despite these doubts about the value of the WWW, everyone had enjoyed the process of producing a Web page for their group. It was inherently interesting and the final product was something to be proud of even if they expected it would not be viewed very much.

Most participants used texts already generated by the organisation (eg sections from within a newsletter or handbook) to put on their sites or else had checked carefully with their group as to whether their text was appropriate. They wanted sites to be user friendly with key features being links to other sites and use of some scanned images.

During the course we had looked at both editing with HTML tags and using a text conversion package (Internet Assistant). Most people preferred to convert text than play around with html tags but were pleased to see both approaches. One person authored her pages entering her own tags as it seemed to give her more control.

Everyone found the process of writing web pages much easier than they had imagined it would be, despite the problems of the bug within our version of Internet Assistant which meant that several people lost some work. Another frustration was that the machines were often slow to download network software. Macintosh users faced an additional problem in that there was not a readily avail-

able Macintosh converter programme, so they were asked to work on the Internet Assistant on the PC, until a Macintosh package ('Front Page') we had ordered would arrive. However they found generic PC procedures (we were using Windows 3.1 operating system) such as opening packages, saving works and opening files were not intuitive. The issue of dual platforms arose for a second time when we realised that the scanner we were using would only save in a PC format.

## On-line discussion

The general view was that the e-mail distribution list was useful in that it introduced everyone to the idea of on-line group discussion. The style of the messages, appealed strongly. Participants liked the "relaxed and informal" approach and were interested in reading what other people had to say. They saw the forum as providing an opportunity to give an opinion, or to describe a personal experience rather than to develop an interactive discussion, even if some messages did refer explicitly to what others had said. However members of the course responded differently to writing to the forum and their feelings ranged from "relaxed", "a little odd" to "quite embarrassed".

## Constraints on discussion

The list was more useful to members as a rehearsal for what a forum might look like. Everyone said they would join a discussion list in the future if it was appropriate to their professional, group or social interest. But they would obviously need to be informed about the existence of the list and they would need convenient access to a terminal. A particular value of the list would be to create international links.

The discussion list was valued by everyone on the course irrespective of their level of participation. In fact two people who had participated very little seemed more satisfied than those who had participated more frequently. Indeed frequent mailers were disappointed at the low level of response to their messages, even if they understood the constraints on other people. What, then, held some of them back from a higher level of participation? The answer seems to lie in a combination of:

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- shortage of time (in the words of one person, "I am sorry not to have joined in more in the discussions. Perhaps they almost sounded a little frivolous compared to all the work I have to get through.....");
- a general reticence ("I am happier talking than writing and on a list I would worry about what I had written and how people would interpret that");
- access to machines, ("I had to come in specially to the university get my mail, I did manage it but it kept my messages down.");
- a perceived lack of a shared interest, (If I felt strongly about something I would have added my views but I didn't really have anything strong enough that I wanted to say").

### Participants thoughts on networked communities

The two people most enthusiastic about linking community groups in Sheffield worked for a group whose activities overlapped with other groups in the local area but found there was not enough contact between them. They gave the example of arriving on the same site the day after another group had visited and this could have been avoided if groups had listed their weekly activities on a web site. They also felt that distribution lists between groups could be set up to discuss more general aspects of environmental and community work such as fund raising, exchange of experiences and support. In addition, they saw the opportunities presented by a national link with colleagues in offices around the country. However, they were aware that every office in their organisation already had access to e-mail but many people did not use it very much, and certainly it had not been used for group discussions. It was invariably easier to telephone to get an immediate response and people had not got in the habit of switching on their e-mail. But it would be worth trying in the future.

The message from other members of the course was that they could see how very local links between organisations in a particular area of the city might work but in general links between similar groups around the country would be more natural and stronger. They could use e-mail to keep each other informed of their work and discuss general issues of funding and direction as well as new initiatives. As one said:

"Our PTA is a good one because there are a lot of new people on but people don't really realise the work we are doing in raising money and in supporting the school. It would be very interesting to share experiences of this with other PTAs and to discuss how they work. I guess that some PTAs work really well while others struggle. That would be an interesting thing to talk about."

However there would need to be a critical mass to make this kind of exchange worthwhile. Everyone stressed that these were early days in getting community groups linked up. They were only too aware of the issue of access. Until a significant number of groups were linked up and were in the habit of using e-mail then the idea of an on-line community was a long way off. At the moment many voluntary organisations did not have the funding or the skills to get started. Training was also an issue here. One participant described a course for which a colleague had gone to a great deal of trouble and expense for her organisation to attend. But she found that it was not suitable for her needs and the day had been wasted.

In general the participants on the course were themselves cautiously enthusiastic about the Internet. They could see it as a tool, and here most interest was focused on e-mail not the WWW, which could allow members and supporters of groups to discuss and stay in touch. However several people spoke about the value of face to face meeting. As one said:

"I'd rather go to the pub to talk about things, I know that there are a lot of campaigns and what not which could take

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advantage of these networks but they would need to keep going with public meetings and meetings in the pub.”

Another participant expressed a widely held view:

“The idea of networks of community groups could work but you would need to get a hard-core of enthusiasts, you would need quite high access and the commitment to actually connect and to go on to say something. Then if you get over these you may have problems coping with the amount of information that is out there, but it is worth having a go and seeing what will happen.”

3. There is cautious enthusiasm for electronic networks alongside an awareness that virtual communities will not replace physical communities.
4. The development of networked communities will be hard to predict but a critical mass is needed to sustain them. Vertical networks, eg national or international links between groups, may be easier to initiate than ‘horizontal’ ones, eg between groups which share the same locality.

### Reflections About the Development of On-line Communities

- There were four themes which emerged from the experience of the course:
  1. The process of teaching and learning IT skills is relatively straightforward but their use in authentic contexts raises difficulties. For example on the course most people quickly learnt how to navigate and search the WWW but getting hold of relevant information was much more drawn out process. Similarly it was not difficult for course members to grasp the principles behind writing html documents but they found it time consuming to discuss and negotiate the content of their pages with their groups.
  2. Discussion seems to be essential to sustain an on-line networked community. Electronic forums give their members opportunities to articulate opinions and learn from one another, they are not just the receivers of information. However there are significant constraints on those wanting to take part in discussions.

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