

CHAPTER 3

LOCATING LEARNING

1. INTRODUCTION

Active learning can occur anywhere. Providing opportunities to the learner to actively engage in the experience of comprehending, reflecting and doing – acting out the learning – can be done in a laboratory setting, in a classroom using a case study as stimulus, or out in the “field” – under actual living and working conditions. The instructor may not have a choice always in terms of the location. Some types of questions and areas of learning call for a laboratory and are best engaged there. Evaluating different ICT design options on user attitudes may be an example; evaluations of this type would be far easier to attempt in a controlled setting. A case study is very well suited to stimulate thinking and learning on the effects of automation on worker displacement in industries with varying degrees of labor organization. Here again, the criterion of feasibility would recommend the case study method versus study in the field. A case study would be able to cover more ground, by simulating conditions in a greater variety of industries more efficiently and perhaps even more effectively than would be possible by other means. Such methods have significant strengths even if the instructor could avail of field-based instructional methods. We are not arguing for the superiority of learning-in-community over these others. However, for our purposes, we have found the field – the non-profit sector in the immediate geographical community – to be invaluable as an enabler of the kind of learning we wish to foster

As we noted in the previous chapter, our approach to active learning is to locate it in the proximate community. Engaging real problems in real organizational settings can provide important benefits to the learner. We discussed the four levers of our approach: client-centered work, learning through social participation, task motivation, and the social side of professional action. We focus on the last in this chapter – in particular, we discuss the historical opportunity for greater professional involvement in the proximate community and how our teaching has responded to it. The learning-in-community opportunity we provide through our classes has helped our students appreciate, albeit in a limited sense, the social benefits that professionals can bring to some of the neediest constituents in the locality they live in. Clearly, transformation – in terms of change in the learner’s values and in the broader social context of their action – is a complex process over time and no class or single course of study, however intensive or elaborate, can hope to accomplish it. Our classes simply provide one opportunity (for many of our students they have

tended to be the first) for students to get involved in what we term technological activism – civic engagement locally in a technical consulting capacity.

Underlying our approach to locating learning in the proximate community are the ideas of John Dewey. As a pragmatist, Dewey believed in the civic responsibility of education through humane action. His view of the educational enterprise is centrally relevant to the ideas discussed in the last chapter and to the objective of the present one.

To learn in a humane way and to humane effect is not just to acquire added skill through refinement of original capacities. To learn to be human is to develop through the give-and-take of communication an effective sense of being an individual distinct member of a community; one who understands and appreciates its beliefs, desires and methods, and who contributes to a further conversion of organic powers into human resources and values (Dewey, 1927, p. 21).

2. A DIFFERENT DIMENSION OF THE DIGITAL DIVIDE

The Digital Divide – the gap between those with access to ICT and those without – has been called “one of America’s leading economic and civil rights issues”(U.S. Department of Commerce Report, 1999). The divide is pervasive, and it appears to be growing. However, present characterizations of the divide are mainly concerned with individual and household access to ICT devices – computers, telephone modem and the Internet. Access to ICTs on the part of non-profit organizations and public institutions is an important but less publicized dimension of the divide. Public institutions and CBOs struggle with access issues; the problem gets worse for CBOs located in semi-urban and rural locations. As we show below, the organizational dimension of the divide – the challenges faced by organizations with respect to ICT access – gets more pronounced as the ICTs get technologically more advanced. Public institutions and CBOs can facilitate access to ICTs and their benefits quite effectively for residents in low-income communities by virtue of their public function. Their lack of access thus presents a two-fold social problem of considerable urgency. ICT access can help public institutions CBOs (particularly the latter) with operational efficiency and fund-raising; lacking access translates to fewer funding opportunities and less operational efficiency. Second, if they lack access, then so do the populations they serve, and these are usually among the neediest groups in a community. These groups lose in two ways: directly, in that they cannot benefit from ICT-enabled innovations in service delivery; and indirectly, from preventable operational inefficiency. Improving organizational access to ICTs is, we believe, a key to narrowing the Digital Divide.

The many, many consulting projects undertaken through our classes have underlined for us and for our students the extent of the need for ICT resources and technical knowledge in the non-profit sector. We cannot do much to help with the first – ICT resources (as we note in Chapter 5, we did run a program as part of CITI devoted to supplying used PCs to needy organizations, but Project CORE, as it was called, had to be discontinued). We can and have helped with the second – access to technical knowledge. Access to know-how is foundational: even to acquire the appropriate ICT resources, buyers need technical know-how. Our students have seen

too many examples of organizations getting into “solutions” pushed by some consultant and finding that they had unwittingly tied themselves into non-standard and proprietary systems. Know-how is key to ICT acquisition, planning, use. In fact, know-how is technology in its own right, as some have argued (Mackenzie and Wajcman, 1985).

Over the years, access to ICT resources has improved in our community. A local library, for example, recently received six new PCs from a major vendor; a faith-based coalition received 100 used PCs from a local utility company. However, the lack of know-how is a problem each time recipients attempt to upgrade technology or explore new uses of them.

In the over 250 projects that our students have completed since 1991, the majority of the clients (92 per cent) have been CBOs. LAN planning, design, and installation account for nearly 50 per cent of all needs addressed by our students. For most clients requesting help in these areas, the planned network was the very first in the organization. Internet access is a closely related need and accounts for 35 per cent of all projects. The fact that 85 per cent of our projects so far cover LAN and Internet connectivity shows the magnitude of the Digital Divide as it applies to non-profit organizations. As noted, over 90 per cent of our clients are CBOs. Most CBOs are active at the grassroots level in a community. The services they provide range from senior and infant daycare, support services for disabled residents, youth and minorities, and services in community arts and information access (libraries, legal services providers). A proposal to improve low-income residents’ access to healthcare services recently noted the advantages with CBOs as a delivery mechanism: “CBOs are the best-equipped to design and deliver effective outreach and enrollment services...after all, it is the local CBO (that) is the most in touch with the community they serve. CBOs are uniquely positioned to deliver a service that requires a trusting relationship with the target population in their own community”(Greater Springfield Health Access Project, 2002, p. 1.10). Improving CBOs’ access to ICTs can improve that of their clientele to resources accessed through ICTs.

This portrait of widespread disparities in access to ICTs and technical know-how was corroborated by the Urban-net planning effort in our community and by the planning efforts in four other communities funded under the same statewide program to develop advanced ICT community networks. The Urban-net planning effort, conducted in 1997 under the direction of the first author, comprised analyses of user requirements, constraints and resources. Two surveys were disseminated among eligible institutions -clustered into eight functional sectors (e.g., healthcare, government, K-12 schools)—and disseminated through the Urban-Net steering committee. The first survey elicited application needs – what users would like to use the network for. The second survey, the longer of the two, elicited details on the ICT and human support infrastructure and constraints at the respondent site. The surveys were distributed to 300 eligible organizations in the community; 85 completed both surveys, for a response rate of 28 per cent. The surveys were followed up with individual and focus group interviews with 45 individuals from 16 respondent agencies, using structured and unstructured questions. The surveys confirmed what we had learned from our consulting projects: LANs were not yet a common



<http://www.springer.com/978-1-4020-1387-4>

Learning-in-Community

Reflections on Practice

Venkatesh, M.; Small, R.V.; Marsden, J.

2003, VII, 122 p., Hardcover

ISBN: 978-1-4020-1387-4