BRINGING TOGETHER COMMUNITY COMPUTING AT eCHICAGO SYMPOSIUM

[POŁĄCZYĆ RAZEM SPOŁECZNOŚĆ KOMPUTEROWĄ: SYMPOZJUM eCHICAGO]

Abstract: Chicago offers many venues for community computing, as do most US cities. The Chicago Public Library system offers free computing facilities in its 79 sites. In addition to the public library facilities, there is an array of community networks, community technology centres, and community colleges serving the diverse neighborhoods in Chicago; many of these centers have been established by non-profit and voluntary groups with little or no funding. This paper explores how individuals working in community computing: librarians, information workers, researchers, academics, students, policy-makers and grass-roots activists, are brought together at the non-fee paying annual eChicago Community Informatics symposium held at Dominican University, River Forest, Illinois, USA.

COMMUNITY COMPUTING – eCHICAGO – e-INCLUSION – SOCIAL INTEGRATION – USA

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Chicago offers many venues for community computing, as do most US cities. The Chicago Public Library system offers free computing facilities in its 79 sites. In addition to the public library facilities, there is an array of community networks, community technology centres, and community colleges serving the diverse neighbourhoods in Chicago; many of these centers have been established by non-profit and voluntary groups with little or no funding.

This paper explores how individuals working in community computing: librarians, information workers, researchers, academics, students, policy-makers and grass-roots activists, are brought together at the non-fee paying Annual eChicago Community Informatics symposium held at Dominican University, River Forest, Illinois, USA. The first section gives some background to the University, its mission and the importance of its geographic location; this is followed by a discussion of the definitions and links between the concepts of community informatics (CI), social cohesion and social exclusion; thirdly the content of the CI course taught at Dominican University is outlined. The final section discusses how the annual free eChicago conference has become an important venue which enables a diverse group of stakeholders to come together for open dialogue and to exchange ideas and experiences.

**Institution and location**

Dominican University was founded in 1901 as St. Clara College in Sinsinawa, Wisconsin. The University moved to River Forest, Illinois in 1922 and was renamed Rosary College, and renamed again in 1997 as Dominican University [Dominican University, on-line doc.]. It has a total student population of 3,413 (59% full-time, 41% part-time; 1,709 Undergraduate Students: 89% full-time, 11% part-time; 1,704 Graduate Students: 30% full-time, 70% part-time). The Graduate School of Library and Information Science is one of the nations largest Masters of Library and Information Science degree-granting programs. In the Fall 2008, 480 students were enrolled in the MLIS program [eChicago…, on-line doc.].

Dominican University prepares students to pursue truth, to give compassionate service and to participate in the creation of a more just and humane world [Dominican University. Mission statement, on-line doc.]. The University’s motto *caretas et veritas* (love and truth) and identity statement express an enduring commitment to social justice. Within this context, it is easy to see the importance of the study of CI within the University, and the alignment of this course to the mission and identity of the University.

Dominican University is situated in River Forest which is 10 miles west of Chicago. Chicago has some of the most diverse and culturally rich neighborhoods in the country. Diversity is reflected in the City’s 77 designated Chicago community areas [Chicago’s Community Areas, on-line doc.] or the 228 named neighborhoods [Chicago Neighborhood, on-line doc.]. The City of Chicago is right on the door-step of Dominican University and provides the perfect laboratory for the study of CI. The next section defines CI and highlights the importance of links between CI, social cohesion, and social exclusion.

**Community informatics, social cohesion, and social exclusion**

The concept of a community is not new. Throughout the last century, academics have mused on what is a community? Hillery (1955) came up with ninety-four definitions of community and “its definition has continued to be a thriving intellectual pastime of sociologists” [Kruper & Kruper 1996]. What community means has been disputed for even longer than the effects of place” [Bell & Newby 1978].
“The most conventional approach relates to people sharing a geographical area (typically a neighborhood), an idea captured in references to local communities” [Crow 2007]. There are numerous definitions of the emergent discipline of CI exist [Keeble & Loader 2001; Gurstein 2001; Bishop & Bruce 2005]. My definition of CI is the use and application of information and communication technologies (ICTs) in local communities, particularly underserved, under-represented, and disadvantaged communities, to aid community development, social justice and equality.

A major focus of CI is the study of the concepts of social cohesion, social exclusion and digital inclusion which has been used more recently to describe what has often been commonly referred to as the “digital divide”, the “haves” and the “have-nots” [Compaine 2001; Warschauer 2004]. The “digital divide” is not going away but getting worse [Mitchell 2008].

Despite the fact that ‘social cohesion’ is a key term in many areas of current research, the concept is seldom defined [Reeskins 2007]. The term was coined by Émile Durkheim (1893) at the end of the nineteenth century and usually refers to as to “what brings people together”, in particular, in relation to cultural diversity. Jenson and Jane (2002) cited five dimensions to the concept of social cohesion: belonging – isolation: that means shared values, identity, feelings of commitment; inclusion – exclusion: concerns equal opportunities of access; participation – non-involvement; recognition – rejection: that addresses the issue of respecting and tolerating differences in a pluralistic society, and legitimacy – illegitimacy: with respect to institutions. In current theoretical and policy debates concerning social cohesion, the neighbourhood, for example the 220 neighborhoods of Chicago, has re-emerged as an important setting for many of the processes which supposedly shape social identity and life-chances [Forrest 2001].

Downtown Chicago is also home to one of two campuses of the Adler Institute on Social Exclusion (AISE). AISE is a non–profit institute which engages in issues surrounding underserved communities in American society advocating equity and justice. The AISE (2008) defines social exclusion as “processes by which entire communities of people are systematically blocked from rights, opportunities and resources (e.g., housing, employment, health care, civic engagement, democratic participation and due process) that are normally available to members of American society and that are key to social integration”.

The importance of addressing social exclusion in Chicago was highlighted recently by a visit to the AISE campus by the former first – ever UK Minister for Social Exclusion, Hilary Armstrong MP. She launched a new vision for the U.K. on how to address the social, economic and cultural problems for people in underserved communities. Ms Armstrong is collaborating with the Institute on how to help federal, state and local governments in the USA integrate the philosophy of social exclusion into various government functions.

The CI course offered at Dominican University provides a forum where students can explore ways in which ICTs can help social exclusion, social integration and social cohesion, to aid social justice, to improve economic development, and to increase civic engagement. The next section outlines the content of the course.

Community informatics course

The course offered at Dominican University prepares students to work in new digital frontiers, as librarians, information workers, community workers, social workers, and policy makers in local, national, and international contexts. It is an interdisciplinary, socio-cultural course which explores contemporary theory, research, and practice in community informatics. Topics addressed include: community networking and information systems;
social inclusion; public access and spaces for ICT; social capital and social networks; public policy; ethics for CI researchers; wireless networks and communities; building community in libraries; communities and crisis response, and community memory.

As part of the learning process students: define and articulate fundamental concepts of community informatics; discuss the social, economic, cultural, policy, contexts of CI; analyze and assess current local, national, and international CI projects; interpret findings of community informatics research; interpret theories which inform research and practice; apply lessons learned to an information context, and experiment with the development of new knowledge by combining theory with data collected by students.

There is a particular emphasis on discussions around concepts of citizen empowerment; social justice; e-citizenship; e-democracy; e-Government, and civic engagement. In a practical assignment, referred to as the Chicago Case Study students engage with offline and online communities to observe and analyze a local community informatics site situated in the Chicago metropolitan area to illustrate how theory and concepts discussed in class are applied to real-life contexts.

**Chicago Case Studies**

A community informatics site may be a community technology center; a public access computing site; a community center; a grass-roots organization; a local community organization providing IT access e.g. a health agency, a grass-roots organization, a church, a homeless shelter, a library, a school, an after-school club.

Students work individually for a period of 15 weeks to select a site, gain permission to study the organization, develop a proposal, formulate a methodology, collect and analyze data. Findings are shared with the class and with the personnel of the CI site. Case studies describe and analyze the:

- Physical infrastructure and location in the community,
- Intended community / user group,
- Social infrastructure and facilitation / participation of community members,
  - Are they places of community action and/or collaboration? Do people learning from each other?
- Resources – availability, use and purpose,
- Activities / programs of the organization / project,
  - Formal / informal education and training programs that equip community members with skills and knowledge required to become competent users of ICTs,
  - Education, legal, health, and social services programs,
  - Programs to build leadership across community groups – ‘local champions’ who encourage others to engage with ICTs / manage the ICT initiative,
  - Programs accessible to a diversity of community members,
- Capacity building in the community,
- Community involvement in determining objectives, planning, developing strategies for implementation, review and evaluation of the organization / project,
- Sustainability of the site.

The case studies focus on underrepresented and marginalized groups, often with a strong concentration on studies of ethnic communities and youth groups. One example is a study by one student of the South West Youth
Collaborative (SWYC) technology laboratories whose mission is “to unleash the potential of youth from diverse racial, ethnic, and economic backgrounds to become actively contributing members of society through initiatives that engage young people in working for a better world” [SWYC 2008].

Examples of other case studies are listed below.

Examples of 2008 Case Studies:

- “Bonding” and “bridging” of social capital in Chicago’s Ukrainian village neighborhood (Westphal);
- A study of the community technology programs and community culture programs at the Korean American Community Services (Park);
- Teens empowerment in the Computer Clubhouse in Roger’s Park (Dohnalek);
- A study of the role of ICTs in the Chicago Anti-Hunger Federation (Rodgers);
- A study of the computer technology classes at the Pui Tak Center located in Chicago’s Chinatown (Cottonaro);
- The role of the technology lab at the Southwest Youth Collaborative (Garza);
- The impact of ICT on the Work of the Consortium to Lower Obesity in Chicago Children (Kierig);
- Public access computing in the Lake Forest Public Library (Kirsch);
- The contribution of Go Local Illinois in providing health information to local communities (Frank) and,
- The use of community technology as communication and information in EveryBlock (Pliske).

**Global perspective**

In contrast to this local assignment, students are exposed to a global perspective of CI. They debate contentious issues such as the distribution of the One Laptop Per Child (OLPC) in developing countries, and have the opportunity to discuss with international guest speakers, how ICTs can contribute / or not towards community development strategies in developing countries [One Laptop Per Child, on-line doc.]. Speakers have discussed their personal experiences working in projects in South Africa, Haiti, and Puerto Rico:

- In South Africa – “Community knowledge centres for disadvantaged groups: a CI project at the Cape Peninsula University of Technology „South Africa” (Dr Mybrough, School of Communication, University of S. Australia).
- In Haiti – “Communications and Collaboration in Haiti” – FonkoSel aktive pa Digicel (the replication of the Grameen Bank village phone program in Haiti) and the OLPC (MIT XO) program (Dr Kathleen Robbins, Director of Clean Energy, GreenMicrofinance) [GreenMicrofinance, on-line doc.].
- In Puerto Rico – “Prospects for Community and Action” – different community technology center models in Puerto Rico, the Dominican Republic, and Cuba (Dr Sarai Lastra, Universidad del Turabo, Puerto Rico).
- These discussions engage students in global conversations, help prepare students to be global citizens, and to play an active role in a multicultural world.
The eChicago symposium is an annual event held at Dominican University. It is a non-fee paying event, so enabling a diverse group of people, students, librarians, community technology center providers, activists, academics, researchers, e-government officials and policymakers, to come together for open dialogue. Participants share new research on how ICTs can and are being used to create community growth, spur economic mobility, inform collective identity, and support community advocacy.

In 2008, selected students presented findings of their Chicago case studies to an audience of over 100 at the 2nd eChicago Community Informatics Symposium Libraries, Community, Technology Centers and Chicago: Building and serving Our Communities [eChicago…, on-line doc.]. The symposium gives students the opportunity to disseminate their work with a variety of key CI stakeholders in Chicago. Many of these stakeholders, are from non-profit, voluntary organizations with little or no funding, and are unaware of each others existence. eChicago has established itself as an important venue where stakeholders network, exchange ideas, and experiences. Students will present some of their work at the 3rd eChicago Symposium, April 2–3, 2009 and will give individuals from their case study sites the opportunity to meet other key-workers in community technology development programs by inviting them to the eChicago symposium where they will meet with others involved in similar work (this may be for the first time). For the first time this year the symposium will be web-streamed allowing free viewing of the proceedings to a global audience. By this latest initiative, individuals and organizations worldwide may learn from the eChicago experience, and be encouraged to introduce similar community informatics gatherings in other cities.

**Conclusion**

As a non-fee paying event, the eChicago Symposia allows individuals and organizations working in community computing to share their work with the wider Chicagoan community and to participate in transdisciplinary conversations. It connects librarians, community technology providers, activists, academic, researchers, e-government officials, policy-makers and students.

The CI course at Dominican provides an avenue for students to undertake their own research, identify a community site to study, and to share their research with key stakeholders in the Chicago community. In 2008, students identified and carried out research in 22 communities in the Chicago metropolitan area. Many of these communities work on restricted budgets, often staffed by volunteers, and have little capacity to evaluate their activities and operations. Findings from the student case studies are aiding these communities to assess their work and to help them develop strategies for the future.

During their work at the case study sites, students report that they feel they are making what they usually refer to as a “small” contribution to the community: by sharing knowledge and ideas that they have learned in class, and by introducing individuals in the organizations to other CI sites; many of whom are unaware of the existence of such a large network and number of community technology sites in the Chicago area.

CI at Dominican University encourages students to be part of civic engagement and in keeping with the University’s Academic Priorities (2008) “to see themselves as agents in the world and not merely its inhabitants. To (...) design programs and partnerships (...) with external constituencies that develop opportunities for our
students to practice that part of our mission statement that exhorts us to... give compassionate service and to participate in the creation of a more just and humane world”.

GSLIS at Dominican University is producing a new generation of workers equipped with the knowledge and skills to aid social cohesion and digital inclusion in communities; workers who have a voice in the crusade to reduce inequalities and to improve the lives of Chicago’s underserved and under-represented communities.

References


