REDFERN KIDS CONNECT – A COMMUNITY PROJECT BRIDGING THE DIGITAL DIVIDE AND BUILDING TRUST

Andrew Solomon, Deborah Rodrigo, Ryan Sengara
Redfern Kids Connect

ABSTRACT

The Redfern Kids Connect project is a volunteer based project to bridge the digital and cultural divide between kids in the troubled Redfern-Waterloo neighbourhood and the wider community. We describe the project and explore how it fits into the conceptual frameworks of Cox and Freire. The sociological issues raised are illustrated by some of the challenges our activities encounter and how these suggest future directions.

BACKGROUND

The South Sydney City Council website lists the following as problems in some parts of the Redfern-Waterloo area: “high levels of crime, peer pressure on younger kids to take up criminal activities, shops closing permanently as a result of repeated robberies, taxis refusing to enter the area…and residents afraid to go out…” (South City Sydney Council Online 2003). Some kids in the area suffer from the effects of entrenched poverty and environments where drug abuse, crime, poor literacy, and lack of extra educational opportunities prevail.

The Redfern Kids Connect project has been running since March 2002 at the Redfern Computer Centre on the grounds of Redfern Public school. The Redfern Computer Centre consists of a one-room network set-up of approximately 20 PCs, a printer and a scanner. The sessions average 15-20 kids and 10 volunteers, per week. Over the past six months, the session has involved over 60 different kids and 30 different volunteers.

The kids, ages ranging from 5 through 15, are mostly Aboriginal and live on "The Block" in Redfern. Kids also come from the surrounding Redfern-Waterloo community. Volunteers pick-up kids from "The Block" each week, but the majority of kids arrive at the centre by their own means. Volunteers are a mix of Australian and international university students and young professionals. The project is completely voluntary on both the kids’ and volunteers' behalf, is not currently funded and has no paid positions.

The aims of the project are to build computer-user skills among kids of the community and encourage exchanges between project volunteers and kids from differing socio-economic groups by playing together on computers in a voluntary, drop-in environment.

Each Saturday morning, volunteers meet at the computer centre and interact with kids from the Redfern area, while playing on computers. There is significant interaction between kids and volunteers in a dynamic and energetic environment in the computer centre and outside in the playground. We focus on engaging in activities that are driven by the kids' interests, and there is no set curriculum. Common activities include surfing the Internet, playing network games, building webpages, checking and sending web-based e-mail, playing games on various children's websites, and listening to streaming media of the kids' favourite musical artists.

CONCEPTS

As the project has established itself in the community and among kids and volunteers, we started to observe things that could be considered as "progress". This progress was most recognisable in improved computer-user skills with some of the kids, such as navigating with a mouse, accessing programs, or surfing the Internet. Website design has been a mode of creative expression for some of the kids.

Also, through exchanging information and working on activities together, relationships...
have developed within the group (within and between kids and volunteers) and as these grew in depth, complexity and sometimes difficulty, it became clear that we needed a more sophisticated understanding of the project, and its aims and values.

The term "social capital" was one that came up in discussion and readings. Specifically, the work of Eva Cox in A Truly Civil Society is applicable to the developments occurring on a micro-level at Redfern Kids Connect. In her book, Cox describes social capital as the, "processes between people which establish networks, norms, and social trust and facilitate coordination and cooperation for mutual benefit" (Cox, 1995:15). Social capital is created, according to Cox, when we develop active relationships in civic and community groups, "run democratically: people participate because they want to and their processes involve members working together on tasks, developing trust and mutually rewarding relationships." (Cox, 1995: 19). So what will building social capital achieve for communities? Cox says that, "High levels of social capital bring cooperation and norms which may be called civic virtues.

These virtues interns are the base of truly civil societies where the law rests lightly. If we trust others as we trust ourselves, prosperity and economic growth follow." (Cox, 1995:18).

One issue to consider is whether the Redfern-Waterloo community is experiencing a deficit of social capital. The community is experiencing poverty, crime, and is heavily patrolled by police. Considering the social issues the community faces, and by the definition of social capital given by Eva Cox, the community is therefore experiencing a deficit of social capital. There is a lack of built-up trust relationships, social networks and cooperation.

The next issue to consider is whether the Redfern Kids Connect project is building social capital. Based on Cox's definition of social capital and how to build it, Redfern Kids Connect would fit the criteria for a social capital building activity. The project is a voluntary activity on the parts of all parties involved. Furthermore, there are relationships being built, expansion of social networks for kids and volunteers, and a gradual building of trust between kids and volunteers. Technology plays a large role in this, as it acts as an attraction for both kids and volunteers to attend the sessions voluntarily. Technology also acts as a conduit for relationship building as the computers and IT content act as a shared focus for kids and volunteers. Finally, technology in the form of computers is also facilitating the learning of IT skills.

There are issues with the application of the theory of social capital. In the context of Redfern Kids Connect, building social capital should result in removing limits to aspirations, building beneficial relationships and a capacity to build skills. However, we are concerned that the concept of social capital is too closely linked to economics; that from building social capital we can build economically prosperous communities. Should this really be the goal of building social capital, especially in marginalised communities? Surely the issues of social justice and addressing the marginalised status of such communities is a more pressing goal. Furthermore, for marginalised communities, the goal of a "truly civil society", one in which residents are prosperous and trust one another is a long-term goal. The theory of social capital is more difficult to apply in marginalised communities as the indicators with which the achievement of a civil society are measured in social capital theory take a long time to occur, if at all.

Furthermore, the theory of social capital proposed by Cox is not clear on how to build social capital between people from different communities. Specifically, at the Redfern Kids Connect project, volunteers come from the "dominant culture" in the form of young professionals and university students, while the kids come from a "disadvantaged community". In this case, one must examine whether building cultural capital between volunteers and kids using computers, (especially considering that volunteers are in a position of mediators or brokers to computer technology), acts as means of perpetuating the dominant culture or perpetrating cultural imperialism.

Despite its relevant application to bridging the digital divide, the theory of social capital does raise two important questions: Having
observed cultural capital being built at a micro level, how can we transform this into larger societal change in marginalised communities? How can people from the dominant culture come together to build social capital with marginalised communities without cultural imperialism?

Answers to these questions can be sought in Paulo Freire's Pedagogy of the Oppressed, which takes a more radical approach to education with marginalised communities. The goal of a pedagogy of the oppressed is freedom of the "oppressed" classes. This is not achieved by simply meeting in a voluntary environment and exchanging information as in the theory of social capital, but by developing critical thought, a praxis of reflection and action to break the "prescribed" culture of the oppressors. According to Freire, it is by development of critical thought to see their oppressed realities that marginalised communities can achieve freedom. Freire's concept of freedom as an ultimate goal of education differs from the economic and social control indicators that the theory of social capital explores.

Freire attacks the "banking" system of education in dominant culture that focuses on memorisation and proposes a "problem-posing" form of engagement that replaces the traditional teacher-student relationship and makes education a horizontal experience of problem solving for students and teachers.

Students, as they are increasingly posed with problems relating to themselves in the world and with the world, will feel increasingly challenged and obliged to respond to that challenge as interrelated to other problems within a total context, not as a theoretical question, the resulting comprehension tends to be increasingly critical and thus constantly less alienated. Their response to the challenge evokes new challenges, followed by new understandings and gradually the students come to regard themselves as committed. (Freire, 1996: 81).

Freire also suggested the mindset with which a teacher from the dominant culture needs to come into a marginalised community in order to avoid cultural invasion. The co-investigator must be engaged in an act of humanism, must respect the realities of the marginalised group, implicitly trust the people with whom he or she is working, stick to his or her word, and show a consistent effort. Focusing on these criteria will aid in shedding the oppressive tendencies of teachers from oppressive culture.

Freire complements the theory of social capital in the context of Redfern Kids Connect. Where social capital is being developed at a micro level across cultural boundaries, Freire discusses how this connection can be used to nurture kids' critical thought for the purpose of empowerment.

Freire also indicates that our engagement should avoid pushing values of the dominant culture onto the kids. For example, volunteers help kids navigate content such as rap videos which are of interest to the kids and less so to many of the volunteers. This problem solving activity engages both volunteers and kids in discovering each others' realities. On the other hand, Freire’s work is in terms of large scale class dynamics, where our work is at a more micro-social level. Furthermore, we must remain alert to the dangers of depending too much upon the critical thinking of the kids, which is still developing.

ACTIVITIES

This section describes the various activities we have worked with, their outcomes, any issues which arose and the way they were dealt with. In a typical session outdoor games, arts and craft will be taking place but we restrict our attention to computer based activities.

Web surfing and games

The web contains an great variety of games and puzzles which seem to cater to all possible interests the kids may have from choosing wardrobes for Barbie (www.barbie.com) to games of skill such as Powder Puff Girls (http://www.cartoonnetwork.com/ppg/) to quizzes on sport and music. Kids also find information and images of their favourite cars, sporting teams and musical performers. This variety has the advantage of allowing kids to learn about things which interest them, as well as learn skills in searching the web and typing which are the foundation of being able to operate in today's digital world. We have
recorded measurable improvements in the kids’ computing skill and knowledge levels over the period of the project.

The internet also provides an infinite array of images which are violent, sexual or “in bad taste”. On the one hand, the RCC has a web filter NetGear in place to prevent access to sites which are known to have questionable content, but this filter is far from failsafe. Volunteers must therefore confront the question of how to respond when a child surfs material of this nature.

First, the volunteer must recognise their own discomfort at the idea of the child accessing this material. This is in part due to the volunteer’s feelings about what is “right” and in part due to community expectations of people who have a duty of care for minors. At the same time, volunteers must respect the facts: that many of the kids come from an environment where violence is one of their primary realities; that some of the kids are entering adolescence and developing a curiosity about sex ; and that "bad taste" and "funny" have a great deal of overlap to a childish sense of humour. With all this in mind, the volunteer needs to decide how to respond in a way which respects the kids, avoids being authoritarian and protects their own sense of comfort and “rightness”. For the most part, volunteers have generally attempted to discourage the viewing of material of this nature by a combination of remonstration and distraction, but it is not certain that this is best for the long term goals of the project.

Music Videos

One of the favourite surfing activities is to listen to music videos from Launch.com. This helps improve literacy (by reading and typing the names of songs and artists) and understanding web interface conventions. However, this brings up issues both financial and political.

Financially, this is a high bandwidth activity and has on one occasion caused the RCC to exceed its transfer limit and the ISP was unbending in imposing a fine. This touches on issues of how corporate responsibility and funding models determine what is feasible for RKC - even in this rather modest activity.

Rap and hip-hop artists are likely to be popular with the kids, through possible identification with popular African-American culture. However, the images of African – American culture found on launch.com are designed by powerful record labels to convince kids to buy the music. Their engagement with this music could be undermining and dulling them to the realities of their oppression. It is certainly difficult to discuss these subtleties with kids whose conceptual thinking is not yet fully developed, and who are more likely to be attracted to the excitement of the song and images portrayed in the music video.

Digital Photos

For a time, one of the volunteers brought a digital camera to the sessions in the hope that it would give kids the excitement and fulfilment of creation and control, taking images and arranging them on their web pages. While some fun was had by the kids, they quickly tired of the camera because it was old and worked only intermittently. Downloading photos onto the computer was so slow that the kids invariably lost patience and interest in the enterprise. To bring an new camera which worked well into the centre would raise issues of volunteers trusting the kids with their expensive equipment. Even though some relationships with mutual respect and responsibility are developing during the sessions, the atmosphere is highly charged and interactions are fast and connections diffuse, and there is a strong possibility of equipment being damaged or stolen. It would be an unsatisfactory solution for a volunteer to always operate the camera. The feeling is beginning to emerge that a separate, quieter session with a more intimate level of interaction between volunteers and kids might be a place where expensive equipment can be safe and the kids have full control over it. This idea is yet to be tested.

Web Pages

Some of the kids have developed web pages discussing their favourite sporting heroes and musicians, as well as their family and pass times. Once the web pages are developed, some of the kids have continued to maintain
them. The main interest in web page development would seem to be as an activity in which the kids and the volunteers can collaborate and interact - as the kids don't get very much feedback from visitors to their web pages.

**Age of Empires**

One of the most successful activities has been playing the network game Age of Empires. One of the volunteers solicited a donation of 30 promotional copies of Age of Empires from Kellogg Pty Ltd, and they arrived just as the internet connection was cut off for a month due to lack of funds.

Kids quickly picked up on the strategic aspects of the game, team play and politics and allegiances were formed and broken at a tremendous rate. It is generally good natured and a vehicle for kids from different backgrounds and volunteers to interact and have a common interest, to collaborate and compete. At an educational level, kids have learned about the idea of IP addresses as a way of identifying computers, and they improved their typing and spelling by typing in cheat codes and communicating with each other on the chat channel. Even when the internet is working, this is one of the most popular activities.

**Email Penpals**

The idea of facilitating the use of web-based e-mail such as Hotmail or Yahoo! Mail, developed from the idea that kids could make contact and share information with people outside their community using computers. This idea has been introduced in the past few months and has caught on with some kids, while not being of interest to others. Some kids are sending mails to not only their pen pals, but to volunteers and to each other. Additionally, some of this mailing is occurring outside of the sessions.

The first stage of the project saw volunteers encouraging and assisting the kids set up email accounts where they would be able to email people in other countries. In the middle stages, children are now having an email dialogue with their pen pals. Pen pals are international contacts of the volunteers of the sessions. The flow on effects are the development of communication, computer and internet skills, relationship building, and a greater awareness of their world compared with others. We see these effects as a precursor to the development of critical thought.

The fact that most of the international pen pals are friends of volunteers and also from “dominant culture” (young professionals, university students) does raise the question discussed in the Concepts section of this paper of perpetuating dominant culture. This issue could be solved by initiating a pen pal project with kids from other marginalised communities, in other countries. This idea has not yet been acted upon.

**CONCLUSION**

The Redfern Kids Connect project does not seek to replace educational institutions already part of the lives of the kids. Rather it aims at providing an opportunity for kids to gain access to new technologies, build relationships and develop their social skills through different kinds of interaction.

The project faces the problem of how to provide links into other community and IT based activities for older kids as they grow out of the play-oriented environment of RKC which is suited to younger kids. Depending upon funding and volunteer resources, possibilities include branch-off activities at other times such as video-production and social outings.

At another level issues of the suitability of content within a cultural and social context needs to be addressed. As mentioned previously it is important to acknowledge the realities of the community and relevance of program content. RKC aims to do this by not attempting to change the social values of the kids, acknowledge the realities and complexities of their social environments, acknowledge that some issues may be out of the scope of the project, and continue with the horizontal learning relationship between the kids and volunteers.
REFERENCES


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