Fostering Community Literacy

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Abstract

If we conceive literacy practices as a set of activities around texts, including understanding and composing, but also the whole complex of social relations and actions related to making and communicating meaning, then literacy becomes inextricable from community, and from the ways that members of a community address the problems that concern them. Yet we do not know enough about how communities learn; how multiple funds of knowledge can be negotiated, synthesized, and used; and how to bridge knowledge and action, research and practice across the community. This paper presents a framework for fostering community literacy. It describes two action research projects addressing community literacy needs, with special attention to how information and communication technologies can be shaped to support community-wide inquiry and action in a participatory, equitable manner.

Larry Hickman argues in John Dewey's Pragmatic Technology (1990) that for Dewey, technology is the means of resolving a problematic situation. Thus, if we need to find square roots and in solving that problem we devise the radical symbol to help us, then the symbol we constructed is a technology, one which we may now use in future situations. Technologies can then be conceived as the thing we get when we "extract...the full meaning of each present experience" (Dewey, 1938). As communities develop through shared literacies, they construct technologies that reflect their collective extraction of meaning from experience. Thus, community technologies are not only a means to enable or foster literacy, but the product of a community's literacy practices.
The concept of computer literacy is familiar, encompassing computer access, and the acquisition of computer training and content. As members of diverse communities, we must also look to developing our social literacy (Bishop, 2001). We need to learn, in other words, how to read each other, how to grant respect and validity to diverse funds of knowledge and social capital. We need to be socially accessible, opening ourselves to new relationships. Social training must occur as stakeholders throughout a community model and practice a shared vision of social justice. And finally, we need new social content in the form of artifacts and structures - both online and offline - that embody constructive social change (Bruce & Hogan, 1997; Nardi & O'Day, 1999).

Community literacy can then be conceived as a process in which community members bring together their diverse funds of knowledge to co-construct social and computer technologies. In this paper, we describe two existing community literacy efforts in which we are participating. Our participation encompasses studying the development of computer and social technology that is created by communities and which fosters community learning and literacy.

The first community literacy effort we present in this paper involves a wide variety of educators and students interested in more open-ended forms of teaching and learning. They are creating a collaborative virtual environment called the Inquiry Page (<http://inquiry.uiuc.edu>) (Bruce, 2000). This is a web site which has been used in K-12 schools, university courses, museums, libraries, and other community learning settings. The Inquiry Page fosters the online creation of Inquiry Units by teachers or learners. Each unit starts with a guiding question and provides a space for activities of Investigation, Creation, Discussion, and Reflection. Other teachers can use these units and spin-off a copy to adapt to their own needs. In addition, students can spin-off a copy, thus using the curriculum unit as a place for their own work. In this way, curriculum development is not static, or pre-limited, but rather, the kind of dynamic process needed to allow learners to engage with complex material involving scientific, political, and ethical understandings. The cycle employed in the Inquiry Page unit generator presents an idealized model for inquiry, but it does not require users to process steps in a fixed, or linear fashion. Inquiry of this kind leads to new ideas, results, theories, questions, etc. that can be communicated with others across the traditional boundaries that separate teachers from students, experts from novices, and people representing different disciplinary perspectives and types of experience.

The second community literacy effort is the Afya project (Bishop, 2000). Afya (Swahili for "health") is a participatory action research project designed to engage African American women in assessing and increasing their access to quality health information and services. At the same time, it nurtures their interest, proficiency, access, and participation related to information technology and the Internet. Through the Afya project, we are striving to develop a practical vision for library engagement in community health and the digital divide that promotes social justice through community-wide alliances that model more democratic and participative relationships. Thus, Afya is concerned, fundamentally, with developing new social technologies (ways that people communicate and collaborate) as well as new digital tools and resources.
In each of these cases, we see the development of community literacy as involving participatory action research. Community members are engaged in the conceptualization, design, implementation, and assessment of technologies--both social and computer-based--to support community learning. Thus, fostering community literacy is itself a cycle of inquiry in which participants continually both use and evaluate their own community structures and activities. Without such a participatory process, education and outreach can be hollow, of limited value (Bishop, in press; Bruce & Easley, 2000).

Participatory action research means that inquiry is sensitive to the real needs and problems of users, that engagement and negotiation among all participants must be practiced and learned rather than imposed. Research takes the form of action and reflection related to the practices associated with community literacy. In our community literacy projects, we are investigating how participation and collaboration around relevant community needs can develop. As a research scheme, participatory action research can also yield general results that help others attempting to build literate communities in diverse settings and domains. Our paper reports on questions such as the following:

* How do members of disparate groups communicate their knowledge?
* What can students learn from observing the process of learning?
* How does a literate community grow and develop over time?
* How can participatory design and evaluation provide a model for community education and outreach related to both social and computer technologies?

References


