

Bridging the Divide Between Theory and Practice in ICT for Development

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Student-Led Roundtable Discussion (interested faculty welcome)

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Recent years have seen a burgeoning interest in the use of information and communications technologies for development (ICT4D/ICTD). In academia, this has manifested itself as evaluations of Internet kiosks (e.g. e-Choupal, Akshaya, telecentre.org) and other ICTD interventions, as well as projects like One Laptop Per Child (OLPC), Wireless Long Distance Networks (WiLDnet) and MultiMouse, which endeavor to innovate new technologies that address the specific needs and requirements of communities in developing countries. We propose to hold a roundtable discussion, in which PhD students interested in or currently working on questions around information and communications technology in emerging regions can discuss some of the overarching issues entailed in our research topics. In particular, we examine the multi-disciplinary nature of our research, and the role of I School students in understanding where theory and practice meet in ICTD.

Information schools, as a place where social science and technological practice intersect, are well positioned to do this research. Technologists often look at ICTD from an engineering and implementation perspective. Social scientists have a good understanding of the social structures and other factors underlying ICTD deployments. However, communication between the two groups is often limited by a lack of shared vocabulary, and a difference in practice. As I School students, we take an interdisciplinary view on this question, which we hope will result in a more synthesized and well-grounded approach to ICTD interventions.

As with other interdisciplinary endeavors, our challenge is to bridge the divide between theory and practice, understanding how our efforts in understanding ICTs and implementing new ones can contribute to academia. What is the role of social theory and development theory in real-world ICTD deployments? How can existing bodies of knowledge contribute to ICTD practices? Can there be a theoretical basis for practical deployments? We believe that the answer is an affirmative “yes,” but there is no clear and obvious path for us to take in carrying out theory-driven ICTD research projects. For that matter, there are no clear and obvious venues in which we should publish the results of our research.

We have two main goals for this roundtable discussion:

1. **Community Building:** Identify and share experiences with students from other I Schools also interested in this topic, discussing ways in which we can better support each other across schools.
2. **Approach:** Discuss the challenges of doing ICTD research, specifically addressing the challenge of linking theory and practice in the work that we do.

ICTD work necessarily ranges across a wide variety of disciplines, encompassing (but not limited to) fields like public health, development policy, business, education, development theory, human-computer interaction, and networked systems. As individuals, we are not able to be experts in all of these areas simultaneously. As a community, however, we will be able to leverage one another's expertise, building a collective understanding of the work we endeavor to carry out.