

iConference 2009 ~ iSociety: research, education, engagement

February 8-11, 2009, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

<http://www.ischools.org/oc/conference09>

A Wildcard Submission

Topic/Title:

“Engaging Community: Methods and Values in Community Informatics” (A Wildcard Session)

Organizers:

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Goals:

Just as recently as October 2008 the 5th Prato Community Informatics & Development Informatics Conference 2008 focused on how 'social inclusion' or e-inclusion is understood as it applies to communities in their interaction with technology. Social inclusion and e-inclusion seem to be the terms of *de rigueur* as digital divide was in the 1990s when considering technology in communities/society or more specifically, communities *sans* information and communication technologies (ICTs). Metaphorically, previously we offered a bridge for those to cross over to the technology side and now perhaps an open door that allows communities/people to come into technology. If in i-Schools, Community Informatics (CI) is to be used to describe the academic discipline and practice for systematically approaching Information Systems from a “community” perspective (Gurstein); then, these dichotomous frameworks of in/out, haves/have-nots, rich/poor and now, include/exclude do not speak to the spirit of collaboration and openness which is vital in employing ICTs to carry out community processes to attain community objectives. It is not who we as information professional and scholars let in or out but it is about both information specialists and community engaging in a process to bring our respective tools, skills, knowledge, values and traditions as an act of community building in applying appropriate technologies. A process Clara M. Chu calls social engagement/participation or **e-engagement**/participation. Such reframing of CI is a *propos* the i-Conference 2009 theme: “*What is ‘engagement’ in a research institution?*”

Community informatics in the i-Schools needs to be about a practice and discipline grounded on e-engagement where the research we practice respects communities, identifies how technologies can be tapped to produce results they want/need and can sustain. What have 15 years of research taught us about how to do that? An extra complexity for this emerging field of study is that today, new methods are in use, in part because computers are more ubiquitous, the increasing interdisciplinary training of our scholars and the recognition of multiplicity of voices in the intellectual project. Action research and participatory design got community informatics started in the 1990s, when information technology was new and less widespread. Today these methods are joined by surveys, interviews, and observation; GIS, text mining, and archives; and more. And new frameworks are applied: social network theory, asset based community development, social capital (from Bourdieu to Putnam), and many others. In the past we looked at projects carried out in communities, often with technology as an end in itself, often with universities as partners. As IT has evolved and diffused, ways of combining local concerns and new technology are myriad, and researchers have adopted new ways of studying this. Today researchers can find people and groups in communities carrying out their own projects, using technology simply as one useful tool in their environment. How do old and new methods work in these settings?

We are proposing a wildcard submission under the conference theme of “What is ‘engagement’ in a research institution?,” with participants from diverse institutions involved in CI. Our wildcard session will comprise a 90-minute forum in which faculty and doctoral students—with varied academic and professional backgrounds—share the methods that we practice, explain, and promote (teach to future scholars and professionals), with a deliberate focus on communities over technologies. In the discussion of methods we expect theoretical, methodological, epistemological issues to be raised. The anticipated outcome of this session will be a better understanding of the challenges and lessons learned when working with communities, reproducible methods for CI, and a resource list of scholars, projects and publications associated with these methods, all of which can contribute to the teaching of CI.

This wildcard session builds on the successful preconference community informatics workshop at the 2006 iSchools Conference at the University of Michigan, and the Agenda for Community Technologies and Networking wildcard session <http://communitytech.wikispaces.com/> at the 2008 iSchools Conference at UCLA, which attracted more than 40 people. Our attempt this year is to focus the discussion on methods and values in order to *discipline* ourselves. Merriam-Webster provides two definitions of this word, each of them relevant:

1. “A field of study,” where the field is the local community in the digital age
2. “Training that corrects, molds, or perfects the mental faculties or moral character” where we are sharpening our research techniques and clarifying our values.

Without reproducible methods, we are not practicing research. Without a focus on communities over technologies, we risk becoming technicians tinkering with social systems, which we may not understand. This is particularly important because the communities that interest most of us are disempowered and embattled.

Format:

Pathbreaking work of the past is the starting point for this session, followed by brainstorming and debate of the meaning and implications of this past work for tomorrow. In preparation for the wildcard event, each participant will post the following information on the CT WIKI <http://communitytech.wikispaces.com/>:

- 1) Name, job title, affiliation and email.
- 2) Research method(s) used or plan to use in doing community informatics research, associated projects (and urls) and any recommended publications related to the applied methods.
- 3) Up to three challenging research issues encountered in working with community (e.g., access to community, engaging community-based organizations, internal community issues, language, cultural differences, geographic distance, diversity within communities, hardware/software appropriate for community, etc.) and how you put community before technology in these cases.

As well, in order to tap the experience and expertise of our iSchools community informatics network non-conference attendees will also be invited to post their contributions, which we will prepare as a handout to share with conference participants to enrich our discussion.

During the wildcard session itself, we will dedicate the first 45-60 minutes for each participant to provide a two-minute overview of their methods, challenges and how they put community first as previously submitted to the wiki (these will also be displayed in the room as a Powerpoint slide prepared from their wiki submissions). This will be followed by a discussion period in which the participants and audience will explore the interconnection of research issues, knowledge of community and ways of engaging community, identifying lessons learned in order to consider them lessons to share and teach. Kate Williams will serve as recorder to help everyone keep track of the discussion by typing on a laptop

connected to a data projector; this record will be archived on the community informatics wiki. The session may be recorded and notes used as the basis for a research practices article for publication.

In *disciplining* ourselves through problematizing our research practice, we expect to gain more knowledge about e-engagement to include the following practices:

- Harnessing the interdisciplinary strengths of scholars and practitioners
- Developing theoretical frames, methods that will continue to build scholarship
- Fostering cultural competence for collaborative/participatory engagement with communities
- Recognizing the need to not only design and implement technology solutions but for community to sustain them

Participants:

The following faculty, scholars and doctoral students have agreed to participate as of November 30, 2008:

1. Abdul Alkalimat, Professor, UIUC mcworter@uiuc.edu
2. Rucha Ambikar, Research Associate, Center for Information & Society, UWashington rucha@u.washington.edu
3. Karine Barzilai-Nahon, Assistant Professor, UWashington karineb@u.washington.edu
4. Ann Bishop, Associate Professor, UIUC abishop@uiuc.edu
5. Clara M. Chu, Associate Professor, UCLA cchu@ucla.edu
6. Chris Coward, Head, ICT and Development Program, Center for Information & Society, UWashington ccoward@u.washington.edu
7. Mike Crandall, Senior Lecturer, UWashington mikecran@u.washington.edu
8. Rebecca Dean, PhD Student, UCLA becdean@gmail.com
9. Karen Fisher, Associate Professor, UWashington fisher@u.washington.edu
10. Jon P. Gant, Associate Professor, UIUC jongant@uiuc.edu
11. Martha García-Murillo, Associate Professor, Syracuse University mgarciam@syr.edu
12. Caroline Haythornthwaite, Professor, UIUC, haythorn@illinois.edu
13. Patrick Keilty, PhD Student, UCLA pkeilty@gmail.com
14. Todd Marshall, PhD Student, Syracuse University tmarshal@syr.edu
15. Robert M. Mason, Professor, UWashington rmmason@u.washington.edu
16. Liladhar Pendse, PhD Student, UCLA lpense@library.ucla.edu
17. Ramesh Srinivasan, Assistant Professor, UCLA rsriniva@gmail.com
18. Kate Williams, Assistant Professor, UIUC katewill@uiuc.edu
19. Vivian Wong, PhD Student, UCLA vivwong@ucla.edu

We anticipate other individuals will be added as the iSchools conference draws nearer.

Reference:

Community Informatics. Michael Gurstein. 2003. <http://www.communities.org.ru/ci-text/ci-v2.doc>