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Executive Summary

This case study in a school community near Unitec, in Avondale, aimed to assess strategies for building social cohesion as an element in successful implementation of a community internet scheme. It focused specifically on a subsidiary goal to examine the use of social media as tools for building social cohesion. The work involved mentoring among and informal discussions and focus groups with a proportion of 31 parents who were participating in the implementation of Computers in Homes at the school. My previous research indicates a need to further investigate the role of social support among late adopter, new users of the internet, and this study is progressing that work by addressing a role for online social networking.

Results, as in previous studies within Computers in Homes, reinforce the conclusion that this organization uses very effective face-to-face socialisation strategies to enhance belonging and support, but also that the Ning social network appears to be of particular appeal to parents in this situation, offering a new medium for finding support. The latter finding is encouraging and is the subject of ongoing evaluation. As detailed in other sections below, findings are emerging from copious data that still needs analyzing but has been referred to in two quality-assured publications. Considerable volumes of further analysis and commentary needs to be done and will emerge in new publications in 2012.

Background

In a previous multiple case study project (Williams, 2009) on the importance of networks of social support for successful community internet, findings showed that social cohesion already present in a group of new internet users may be linked to comparatively longer-term internet use, and that together over time the social dimension and internet use may build further social cohesion. This is a very useful outcome that requires further assessment.

Recognition of a cycle (from social cohesion through relatively successful internet uptake, in turn building further social cohesion) by community internet practitioners and the ability to make use of it is potentially a valuable tool for agencies intending to use internet interventions for community building purposes (such as CIH). Government funding bodies or other agencies should be interested in measurement of social outcomes where funds are invested. With the ongoing expansion of CIH into many more communities in Auckland this 2011 research aimed (and continues to aim) to refine the tools developed so far, and develop innovative strategies for building the social cohesion component of CIH in further cases.

Given also Unitec's strategic commitment to serving the needs of communities, the research is clearly an excellent 'fit' in terms of working with a nearby community directly in one of Unitec's key catchment areas, Avondale, to equip itself with up-to-the-minute social research to advance the interests of its families and children.

Aims and Objectives

At the early planning stage, the Research Question was:

▪ To what extent does existing social cohesion play a role in determining the relative success of free home internet as a tool for building further social cohesion?

This had to be modified during the development of the study at an Avondale school which emerged out of close collaboration with the Principal and IT teacher. It quickly became apparent that a "hands off" approach was needed and that a traditional quantitative, survey-based approach would not only be ineffective but could interfere with the conditions necessary for the school to establish trust and motivation with the group of families. Therefore the original set of objectives was loosened considerably also, removing the strict measurement approach. The final research aim, derived in a collaborative / partnership research methodology (Craig & Williams, 2011) aimed at giving ownership of the research, and the outcomes, to the community itself so that it could 'own' the research process, was to *further assess* **strategies for building social cohesion as an element in successful implementation of a community internet scheme.**

Further, Computers in Homes norms of practice are moving toward an expectation that the school communities participating in the scheme will tell their own stories about having internet access at home, using any preferred means such as stories, interviews, photos or videos, posted online. Currently the options for sharing stories in this way include a regional CiH blog, school websites and a CiH Facebook page. Therefore the broad aim (above) of assessing the social dimension in successful community internet was focused in this study on a subsidiary goal to examine *the use of social media as tools for building social cohesion*. In developing this expectation that scheme participants will tell their own stories, CiH reflects the emerging scholarly consensus that grassroots community internet initiatives are most successful when the participants themselves own the process.

Methodology

My initial applications for funding and ethics approvals, at the early stages, stressed an overall qualitative approach with mixed methodology case studies. Methods proposed included observation and surveys. However as I have found before in conducting case study research in the community, the researcher is compelled to take a partnership approach and be very much guided by the objectives and wishes of the community itself. I obtained permission from the Computers in Homes Auckland Steering Group to take an exploratory, collaborative approach to the implementation of the scheme at Rosebank School in Avondale. The research was confined to this one case and is continuing at the time of writing. Thus while an application to the Unitec Research Ethics Committee required me to spell out specific methods that would be undertaken, I needed to be prepared to adapt and taken almost an advisory role. This became a research relationship in which I supported the activities and objectives of the school by offering suggestions of ways to enhance the social network of parents and families involved in the scheme, especially through exploring the value of online social networks.

Early plans also included the possibility of involving Unitec students in the study, but I was aware that this was something that would need to evolve – once again, out of the wishes and needs of the community participants. Initially I progressed plans by attending meetings of the CIH families at the school, and meeting with the school principal and Lead IT teacher. At that point we agreed on a *Kaupapa* for the research, which would involve me in a support and advice role within the over-arching objective of the Principal to increase connectedness between homes and school. I then volunteered to be a mentor to parents (in the 10 training sessions run at the school 3 times a week with three groups of ten parents) and maintaining close contact with the teacher in charge of the CIH group, the school's Lead IT teacher. This was a process requiring sensitive, somewhat 'hands-off' management, influenced also by the philosophy evolving in CIH to hand over the research process to communities, so that they tell their own stories. This is an approach to research

that I am also in a position to critique as it seems to me to be a challenging outcome to achieve.

As a mentor to parents in their IT training, I **observed social interactions** and the process of confidence and relationship-building over the ten weeks. Sometimes I would make notes for future reference. I also conducted **1:1 interviews** with the IT Teacher and Principal, at the beginning and end of the training, which were recorded and transcribed. I worked with the IT Teacher to explore which one of three social media the parents would like to use as a means of staying in touch once the ten weeks of training were over. A vote was held in each of the three training groups, to decide between the use of a blog, Facebook or a private login to a section of the school's website. All of these options were demonstrated and discussed with the groups prior to voting. Subsequently little interest was shown in any of these, so I experimented with a Ning network ("Rosebank Online"), inviting the parents to join it. After a flurry of postings to this site, this platform appeared to hold promise as a social network that participants would like to use.

I was also involved as a guest at the parents' Graduation event when they received certificates and their computer to take home. These activities and involvements **informed a growing research narrative** about the unfolding of group norms and supportive relationships.

Around this time I also conducted several small **focus groups** (three parents in each) with the assistance of the IT Teacher who liaised with about one third of the group of 30 and arranged for them to come in to school and talk with me in the school library. Discussions were recorded and transcribed. Finally, I was given access by the CIH National Coordinator to mostly **quantitative data**, gathered using Survey Monkey at the beginning of every group's involvement in CIH, and again one year later. To date I have not made use of it but intend to at some point look to summarise demographic information, and possibly the brief anecdotal comments made by participants at the end if relevant to this study. CIH parents sign their consent to participate in this research when they join the scheme, as these large-scale data are required by the Department of Internal Affairs which funds CIH through the 2020 Communications Trust.

Data generated therefore includes:
- Field notes from observation
- Interview transcripts
- Focus group transcripts
- National survey data which can be analysed by group (community / site)

Other key reference points include the Ning website created for / with the group, and the CIH regional blogs for comparison.

Outcomes/findings

The "end result" has not yet happened. I consider that I have made substantial progress towards meeting the broad aim and subsidiary goal of the study (page 2), with a great deal of data collected and still being processed. As with other similar studies I have done, being qualitative, collaborative and community-based, this study was slow to start, evolved in form and method, and findings did not emerge until the second half of 2011. I reported on initial findings from the study to the Community Informatics Research Network conference in November, and included reference to the emerging study in a journal article published in 2011 as shown below.

At this point the study is ongoing, with findings indicating promise for the use of a private Ning network / community of practice to support group cohesion in community internet. Because of the continuous nature of the work, a good deal of analysis still needs to be done and further reporting and publication will follow.

Conclusions

I believe these are implicit in the comments above. It is too soon for conclusions as the study forms part of a larger body of work and is not in itself yet complete.

Implications

The Rosebank School community has benefited from the expertise, advice and support of the researcher, although this needs to be viewed through the lens of participatory research, which aims to empower participants to be self-determining and to direct research toward objectives that are meaningful to them. I continue to be involved with this group as an expert mentor, available to continue guiding and supporting the CIH group. The school is keen to roll the CIH scheme out to include new cohorts of families that do not have computers and internet at home.

In my broader work as Chair of the Auckland CIH Steering Group (a role I have taken up in 2012) I will be seeking to bring ideas about the value of online social networks for social cohesion to other CIH school communities in Auckland who are interested to explore this approach. In this sense the ongoing research has an evolving applicability, and more will be learned as each new case is explored. This will be conducted under an approved application to the Faculty of Creative Industries and Business for funding within the strategic research foci agreed to in 2011 – in this case, communication for social change.

This work also continues to develop on the theme of the relationship between social cohesion and internet access which I developed in my doctoral thesis (2009) and which was well-received within the Community informatics research and practitioner community(Williams, 2010). What I have done and am pursuing is a fresh and innovative take on the important field of how to make internet access effective and sustainable in the digital divide context. It focuses on the social relationships / cohesion aspect that can be critically important in enhancing effective ongoing internet use in a community setting. I am therefore keen to pursue and further develop community internet research that I have specialist expertise in – few others are generating research in this area.

This Unitec Research funding has enabled useful refinements and development of understanding on the stated subject and research aim. It has therefore been of value and beneficial to a stakeholder community within Unitec's own catchment area.

Publications and dissemination

- Williams, J.E. (2011). In their own words: A case for digital storytelling. Stillman, L., Denison, T., French, R. CIRN Community Informatics Conference - To measure or not to measure: That is the question. Centre for Community Networking Research & Social Informatics, Monash Centre, Prato, November 2011. ISBN 978-0-9581058-9-7

- Craig, B., and Williams, J. (2011). Research informing practice: Toward effective engagement in community ICT in New Zealand. Journal of Community Informatics Special Issue: Research in Action: Linking Communities and Universities. 7/3 ISSN: 1712-4441.

Craig, B., & Williams, J. E. (2011). Research informing practice: Toward effective engagement in community ICT in New Zealand. *Journal of Community Informatics* (Special Issue: Research in Action: Linking Communities and Universities).

Williams, J. (2009). *Connecting people: Investigating a relationship between internet access and social cohesion in local community settings.* Unpublished Doctoral thesis, Massey University, Palmerston North.

Williams, J. (2010). *Resources in unexpected places: Social cohesion and successful community internet.* Paper presented at the Vision and Reality in Community Informatics: CIRN -DIAC Conference, 27-29 October 2010, Monash Research Centre, Prato, Italy

Williams, J. (2010). Resources in unexpected places: Social cohesion and community internet. L. Stillman & R. Gomez (eds). Vision and Reality in Community Informatics. CIRN-DIAC Conference Proceedings.