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Novices No Longer: Computer Education for Rural Adults

by Sandra Herbert & Marguerite Cullity

This paper reports on "Introduction to Computer" classes conducted in Ballarat, Victoria as part of Adult Learners' Week, 2002. It outlines the background to the classes, topics covered, participants' reflections and further actions taken. The paper reveals the social and learning outcomes experienced by adults who participated in the computer classes. In addition, it explains the role of Graduate Diploma, Secondary, Information Technology Education students in planning and evaluating their teaching practice.

Our interest in conducting Introduction to Computer classes for rural adults stems from teaching higher education pre-entry and undergraduate students. When working with these students we realised the need for computer classes for adults.

Our respective work roles as a lecturer and an academic skills adviser at the Australian Catholic University (ACU), Ballarat campus, provided the opportunity for us to conduct computer classes during Adult Learners' Week, especially as the University encouraged its teaching staff to contribute to the Week's activities. The University provided the necessary funds and resources to conduct the classes; for example, the use of a computer laboratory, purchase of computer discs, photocopying costs, and staff time.

An Overview of Classes and Students

The first class introduced students to basic wordprocessing practices and the second class introduced them to Internet and email practices. Classes were free and were advertised in church newsletters and in the local paper. Each participant had the use of a personal computer and he/she was provided with a floppy disk on which to save information. Due to the

number of computers available, (22) and the aim of providing each students with a computer we set a class limit of 22. We were overwhelmed by the rapid and enthusiastic response from the local adult community and both classes were filled.

The adults who participated in these classes were predominately retirees with home access to computer technology. In addition, other participants included younger adults with outdated information technology (IT) skills or semi-professionals requiring IT knowledge for vocational purposes.

The purpose of the computer classes was to assist learners to compose and access information electronically. Moreover, the rationale for the classes was based on the pedagogic beliefs that: adults access to computer education sessions and the benefits for them are important in 1) developing their computer literacy skills (Leu, 2001); 2) enabling them to communicate electronically; and 3) assisting them to develop online social networks (Grace, 1998). Furthermore, we view these benefits as helping to alleviate the social isolation experienced by some rural adults.

Class Structure and Feedback

Computer classes were conducted on two consecutive weekdays (9:30 am to 12:00 noon) in one of the University's computer laboratories. The format for each class involved a PowerPoint presentation followed by a self-paced learning workshop.

Day 1: The PowerPoint presentation explained specific wordprocessing practices, and a four-page handout provided participants with additional information. The participants were asked to compose a document (e.g., letter, recipe) and they used the handout to show them, for example, how to block, cut, paste,

italicise, bullet, spell-check and save information. In preparation for Day 2's Internet class participants were asked to identify topics of interest to them. They were provided with relevant URL sites from which to access information. Some of these topics and sites included the Australian Stock Exchange, Gardening Australia, family lineage/trees, and The Age newspaper.

Day 2: The PowerPoint presentation explained the use of the Internet and how to access search engines (e.g., Google & Alta Vista). Using a list of sites, participants viewed information of interest to them and then conducted a personal search. Providing them with sites enabled the teacher to explain the role of a URL and the importance of typing it correctly. The second part of the class addressed email practices: how to initiate a Hotmail account and how to compose and send an email.

When organising these classes we were mindful of the individual attention required by beginning computer learners and, to enable us to work individually with them, we approached University staff and postgraduate students to attend and assist participants on an individual needs-by-needs basis. Last, at the end of each class the participants completed an individual feedback sheet: how they found out about the class; their reasons for participating; what they liked about the class; and suggestions about changes to it.

Written feedback indicated that they participated for personal interest reasons; mainly, to: access electronically information; improve their computer skills; participate in the technological-age; and communicate with family and friends. The comments below reveal



student interest in acquiring IT skills. Specifically, they participated:

To acquire new skills/experience searching the Internet.

To learn about computers and the Internet.

[As] I am always looking to learn.

Participants' comments illustrate the importance retirees and adults place on understanding and using information technology to communicate with others and participate in a learning and electronic community.

Learning in a friendly and informal classroom environment was an important aspect of the program for the participants. In addition, many of them revealed a desire to participate in future classes, especially as they wanted to learn further wordprocessing skills. The comments below illustrate these points:

[I liked] the fact that "helpers" were plentiful and browsed around and the clarity of instructions given by presenters.

No one made me feel stupid.

[It was] a chance to use a computer with someone around who can help when needed.

[I liked the] non-threatening, friendly atmosphere.

The above comments indicate the importance adult learners place on having ready access to teaching support and their need for a non-threatening learning environment. A learning environment, that is, that develops rather than challenges their beginning IT knowledge, especially if they are to increase their confidence as learners and or IT users.

When commenting on how the program could be improved, some adults suggested that there were too many participants in a class for it to be conducted in a self-paced manner and they suggested that a whole-class, step-by-step approach be used instead. Participants, that is, working together as a whole group and following step-by-step instructions.

In regard to class content, the Internet class was preferred by most of the participants as it offered them an opportunity to explore sites of interest to them; that is, to research a vast pool of knowledge and to be a part of a wider learning community. For example, a participant described the thrill she experienced

when discovering new knowledge, and another participant was excited about the prospect of making email contact with her granddaughter. Their comments follow:

I liked the site. I found out about roses. It showed varieties I had never seen before. It was great!!!!

My granddaughter is in Europe and she doesn't write letters. Now I can email her.

These comments reveal the educational and social benefits access to information technology realises for adults.

Based on this feedback, follow-up classes consisted of a maximum of twelve participants and were conducted using a mix of whole-class and individual teaching and learning approaches. Moreover, changing to a whole-class approach enabled learners to assist each other when a tutor is not available; this was especially important as many of them had no or limited computer experience.

Reflections and Actions

When reflecting on the structure, content and delivery of information we were pleased with the participants' enthusiastic involvement in class activities. However, we were concerned that each session covered too much content in the limited time available. Based on participant feedback and our own reflections, we made the following changes: to hold classes over four rather than two sessions and conduct a mix of whole-class and self-paced sessions. In addition, we explored ways to conduct these classes throughout the year and involve — as part of their assessment — ACU, postgraduate Information Technology Education students in the planning and delivery of information.

Student Planning and Delivery: Initial Trials (2003)

In first semester of 2003, four Graduate Diploma of Education (Secondary) students planned, delivered and evaluated one wordprocessing and one Internet class for adults in the Ballarat community. Classes were supervised by the students' lecturer. Class size consisted of twelve participants and information was delivered using a whole-class

approach and the participants then worked on self-paced activities.

Wordprocessing class: The students delivered a PowerPoint presentation for one hour and participants then worked individually on their documents for the remaining hour. The wordprocessing skills explained in the presentation were ones required to compose and edit documents. For example, the participants composed a letter and edited a cooking recipe; the recipe was provided on a floppy disk. Whilst the participants were working on these documents the students provided them with individual assistance.

The initial feedback from 2003 classes indicates that the adults participated for confidence in addition to computing-based reasons. They also noted their enjoyment of last year's classes and were keen to participate in follow-up sessions, especially as most of them perceive themselves as "novice" computer users. An area of interest to the participants was to learn how to format formal documents (e.g., minutes, newsletters) and to use the Letter Wizard. Individual participants commented that they required assistance with inserting symbols, recognising toolbar icons and manipulating the mouse. Overall they found the instructors helpful and patient and that the session increased their understanding and knowledge of wordprocessing skills. Following are some of their comments:

Doing the newsletter was useful for me. I am the secretary of a club which has a newsletter.

The Letter Writing Wizard made setting out a letter easy.

I learnt a lot and enjoyed last year's sessions, and I needed the help I obtained today.

This feedback reveals adult learners' desire to shift from a novice computer user to a socially-competent IT user. It also reveals that the adult retirees desire to be involved actively in the organising of events and writing of material for their community. The participation of adults within a community is not a new occurrence; however, what is new is the electronic means that support their social networking and communication needs.

Internet class: During this class the Information Technology

Educational students revised Internet procedures and then worked individually with participants. First, the students revised Internet searching and assisted participants to locate sites of personal interest. Second, they assisted the participants to set up individual Hotmail accounts. These accounts were then activated to send and receive messages during class-time. Anecdotal feedback suggests that the participants were able to access sites of interest to them and that they enjoyed participating in the Internet community. In addition, they appreciated the individual assistance provided by the students.

Adult learner's interest in the Internet and sending of emails indicates a desire to be a part of an electronic community; a desire, that is, to access information outside of their local society.

Conclusion

Rural adult learners are interested participants in the electronic age. Their desire to participate in wordprocessing and Internet classes indicates a further desire to socialise and communicate with their immediate and wider communities. Towards this end, introduction to computer classes for rural adults are important in

developing and maintaining social networks for these learners.

The computer classes, in addition, provided a purposeful opportunity for Graduate Diploma (Secondary) students to design and deliver PowerPoint computer classes to adults. The delivery of these classes extended the students' teaching and learning experiences and also provided them with an opportunity to contribute to the Ballarat adult community's IT learning needs.

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- Leu, D. (2001). New literacies for new times. *Fine Print*, 7-14.
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