

Community-based learning: A model for higher education and community partnerships

Abstract

The effectiveness of community informatics as a vehicle for community development is considered through a critical review of CI literature. CI is presented as an academic construct that needs to reflect critically on its research and ICT practices. The goal to engage effectively within the social networks that comprise community ecologies requires the development and application of relevant, effective and appropriate practice and theory. Community learning theory is presented as providing an interesting route to understanding community development and a model of community learning partnerships between community and academe adopted in Brighton & Hove in the UK is discussed.

We are surrounded by a pragmatic discourse that would have us adapt to the facts of reality. *Dreams* and *utopia* are called not only useless, but positively impeding.

(Freire, 2002. p.7)

Introduction

Since its inception at the turn of the millennium community informatics (CI) has been imbued with a community development rationale (see e.g. Gurstein, 2000 and 2003a; and Pitkin, 2006). However, in practice, the impact of CI on community development¹ is less than impressive. There have been many technological contributions at the micro level but there appears to be an increasing tendency to overstate the scope and nature of academic engagement in and with real life, geographically located communities. The technological artefacts and theoretical discussions emerging from much of CI discourse provide little convincing evidence of community involvement, preferring instead to focus on university based experiments or abstract technological projects remote from the challenges and realities of lived community.

This is not to suggest that the work of all CI researchers/practitioners follow this trend. Far from it, one only need to look to the work that has been, and continues to be, done on Teeside, in Melbourne, Brisbane, Illinois or Milan to name but a few examples of good practice. However, much of what passes for CI appears not to be grounded in the rich, diverse and often socially contested spaces, social networks and processes that form community practice (Glen, 1993 and Butcher *et al*, 2007). CI is considered here as an academic construct that has some considerable way to go before it can claim to contribute to community development in any meaningful way or be viewed as an agent of meaningful and sustainable social change in a Network Society (Castells, 2000).

With this in mind, a pertinent question for readers of this journal might be *in what ways might community informatics contribute to the practices and policies of community*

¹ (T)he main purpose of community development is to enable people to work together in egalitarian and democratic ways to develop collective solutions to shared problems (Gilchrist and Rauf, 2006, p7)

development? Of course, such a fundamental question gets to the very centre of the purpose and ethos of CI and in turn, stimulates secondary questions. If, as I argue here, CI is an academic construct, that is to say, is still driven by academia, how then do its representatives in academe engage with the social groups, networks, activities and practices existing within the environs of community development, so that CI becomes a part of community existence? In what ways might ICT contribute to, support and sustain these social processes? How might the artefacts, applications, platforms, services, spaces and networks emerging from CI be planned, designed, implemented and developed in partnership with community citizens so as to meet CI's stated purpose of enabling "community processes" whilst achieving "community objectives" (Gurstein, 2003a. p.77).

By grounding our work in, and contributing to, the day to day activities of community life, we make the technological developments and services that emerge as CI outputs socially useful and meaningful. This paper reflects critically on the conceptual development of CI's first decade and considers an emerging model of community-based learning being developed through the participatory partnerships and practices arising between community media students and staff at the University of Brighton and community practitioners and citizens from geographic communities in Brighton & Hove and Kenya. As former UK Secretary of State for Communities and Local Government, Hazel Blears, commented, "there isn't a single service or development in Britain [anywhere] which hasn't been actively improved by involving local people." (DCLG, 2007, p.2). So why does so much of the CI literature appear to overlook the processes of building partnerships between academic research/practice and community?

Community communications – a partnership approach to CI research and practice

Pitkin provides us with a critical and useful reflection on the effectiveness of CI's contribution to community development, in which the latter is described as facilitating "efforts to build local capacity, educate and organise community residents and increase their access to local policy making that affects their lives" (2006, p78). We are encouraged to consider the effectiveness of CI through a community development lens and urged to be critical in, and reflect on, our activities. He further exhorts us to "collaborate in constructing truly participatory, transformative and ethical community informatics applications that support community development" (Pitkin, 2006, p.95).

Of course, collaboration and partnerships of this nature require input from external agencies as well those from communities and academics². Policy makers, commercial enterprises, higher education institutions, community development agencies and even community practitioners bring all manner of power and influence (funding, resources, expertise, etc.) to the community partnerships table. However, power is a moveable feast that is dependent on people's acceptance of its existence and dynamic nature. Power can and does change. It exists in a constant state of flux. It is often exchanged between groups of people and within the context of community organising and partnership development it is often based on cooperative interaction (Biklen, 1983). For community partnerships, such as those being

² In the context of this paper, when the word academic is used as a noun it assumes the scholarly knowledge and practices of teaching & learning; research; & ICT design, implementation and development.

considered here, to be both effective and sustainable, the power to determine and control community processes and decision making must rest within the communities themselves.

If CI practices are to be guided by a community development ethos, it follows that changes to the community resulting from CI interventions should be agreed on and acceptable to the communities involved. This includes the design, implementation and development of technological artefacts and systems. Such a partnership approach to CI interventions will see CI practices shaped by community needs and community voice rather than the other way round. Community development involves processes “of strengthening individuals, groups and organizations to gain the knowledge and power to work towards change in their communities” (Banks, 2003 p. 12) and CI should do likewise.

Eventually, as CI practices become embedded as integrated elements of community life, this will become an iterative cycle of community practice shaping CI practices which in turn shape community practice (Sclove, 1995) but the starting point for this process to emerge should always be determined by community need, not academic imperative or technological expediency. A central element of effective community informatics research/practice and partnerships is that they encourage local people to become “the subject of their own investigation, rather than the object of an external agency’s concern” (Wang & Burris, 1997). Contextualizing CI as a potential transformative agent for community development focuses attention on what Gurstein terms *effective use*, i.e. “the capacity and opportunity to successfully integrate ICTs into the accomplishment of self or collaboratively identified goals.” (2003b).

Gurstein’s *effective use* thesis suggests that communities need access to ICT in order to assist community development and empowerment in a digital age, but emphasizes that access in and of itself is inadequate in achieving this end. Knowledge of how to use ICT is also required. As is the capacity and capability to apply that knowledge to the contextualized processes, interactions and activities found in the social, economic, ethnic, cultural, religious, family and friendship ties (Presthus, 1970) of community life. In my experience as a CI academic engaging in partnerships with communities in the UK and Kenya, a prerequisite to community empowerment are the informal education practices (Packham, 2008) of community learning (Nielsen, 2002).

Community Learning

The main focus of community work and workers in the UK, since the emergence of community development in the 1960s, has focussed on enabling people to become active, and to organise and engage in community action. This type of community involvement is often described as *active citizenship* and has been defined as “being involved in your community, having your say and taking part in decisions that affect you. Above all it is about people making things happen” (Packham, 2008. p.149). Or put another way it “is about the active participation of people in their own transformation” (Ledwith, 1997. p.13).

Active citizenship is presented here as an indicator of community empowerment. It is considered alongside community learning because the voices of many communities, especially disadvantaged and marginalised communities, often go unheard in modern

society and community learning is a process which, when grounded in everyday community life, enables the capacities of people to be built in an informal but relevant manner. Community learning not only enables and facilitates capacity building by equipping people with the skills, information, knowledge and support through which community voices can be heard; but also gives them the confidence to speak and engage in dialogue with others – an essential ingredient when collaborating in partnerships comprising people from within and beyond local community networks.

Whilst community learning focuses on any subject matter of relevance to expressed community need it is always *participatory* in approach and seeks to build *dialogue* between learners. Dialogic exchanges between learners occur when information and knowledge are exchanged. This can be through *conversational communications* and/or through groups of people *learning by doing*. Community learning therefore encourages community *networking* (Schuler, 1996; Day, 2009) processes in which dialogic exchanges are the transactions between community learning network nodes, i.e. learners (Nielsen, 2002). Packham provides a similar illustration of community learning processes through a depiction of a pan-European participatory research project investigating the contribution of community learning to civic and civil involvement. Packham describes community learning processes as:

- *Learning with others* (recognising the importance of the participant's identity, connectedness to the community and a sense of agency to achieve something worthwhile);
 - *Learning from experience* (based on evaluation and critical reflection);
 - *Learning and doing* through collaborative activities undertaken by groups.
- (Packham, 2008. p.110)

From both discussions of community learning (Nielsen, 2002 & Packham, 2008) it is not difficult to identify a relationship between community learning and community development, indeed Falk & Harrison describe community learning as the processes and outcomes (the "oil in the cogs") that produce and sustain community development (1998). Whilst community learning can be described as the *oil in the cogs* of active citizenship and community action, the outcomes of change brought about through community learning processes are dependent on the nature of its community network ties.

Networks within and beyond the community, enabling leadership, and community norms and values that accept diversity, yet include some shared norms and values are three aspects of social capital that help communities to be learning communities.

(Kilpatrick, 2000, p.4)

Huysman & Wulf contend that "Community members will be more inclined to connect and use electronic networks when they are motivated to share knowledge with others, able to share knowledge and have the opportunity to share knowledge" (Huysman & Wulf, 2005. p.9). A similar argument is offered by Garratt & Piper, who in the context of community volunteering suggest that people will not participate, "unless there is the prior capacity, drive or motivation to become involved" (2008. p.56). Within the context of CI this poses other fundamental questions for us as academics seeking to understand the world in which

we live – namely, what do we have to offer communities so as to unlock the ‘capacity, drive or motivation’ to appropriate ICT and how do we do this?

In my experience, trust is a big factor in developing effective networks of community knowledge exchange and learning. Building trust between academics and community is also a prerequisite to unlocking community motivation to use ICT for community building activities. The networks, norms and trust that develop in communities, i.e. social capital,-- when individuals, families, groups, etc. share information, knowledge and other resources in pursuit of common community goals, are crucial components of effective CI initiatives.

However, like all forms of capital, social capital is valueless unless the opportunity (capacity and capability) and the motivation (community development/action) to use it can be exercised. Simpson argues that, “understanding the role of social capital in the success of CI initiatives as community development activities and widespread adoption of ICTs can enhance the likelihood of the sustainability of the CI initiative, thereby increasing the benefits that the community may derive” (2005, p.114). We argue that such understanding of social capital can only permeate and influence CI partnerships when CI practices become part of the interwoven fabric of community life. Simpson concludes her seminal text on CI and social capital by reminding us that,

Projects must be designed in such a way that they are supported by soft technologies that help to build local capacity and leadership, encourage community ownership and strengthen local social infrastructure and networks, and therefore build social capital. If these factors are neglected, the impacts of a CI initiative can be limited and short-lived. The negative impacts resulting from the failure of a community-focused CI initiative may spread so far as to have a flow-on detrimental effect on the community’s social capital, thereby undermining not just the sustainability of the CI initiative, but the sustainability and resilience of the community as a whole

(Simpson, 2005, p.115).

My experiences of community learning through the Community Network Analysis (CNA) project (Day, 2009) suggest two main areas of consideration for all CI initiatives. Firstly, community learning is contextual and affected by the environment in which it occurs (Lave & Etienne, 1990; Boettcher, 2007). Creating spaces that enable citizens to participate in CI activities, projects and initiatives that contribute to community life in a positive and sustainable manner should be a fundamental part of the way we work. Therefore, CI should encourage participation in capacity building through community learning in ways that relate and contribute to community development goals and action. Secondly, social interaction is a crucial component of learning. Traditional community ICT training courses typically lack social or community contextualization and are often heavily influenced by performance measurement and the target demands of funders. Training is often task oriented and shaped by a model of passive ICT consumption whereas community (ICT) learning is intended to empower learners with knowledge for change and is shaped by community development principles (Gilchrist & Rauf, 2006).

For readers unfamiliar with the CNA project, I should perhaps explain that the Community Network Analysis projects were research projects funded by the research programmes of the UK Economic & Social Research Council's 'People at the Centre of Communication and Information Technology'(PACCIT) and the Brighton & Sussex Community Knowledge Exchange (BSCKE). Synthesising community informatics practice and research, both CNA projects examined and explored ICTs as agents of community development and learning. To this end the CNA team encouraged community participants of Participatory Learning Workshops (PLWs) to generate their own learning contexts (Day & Farenden, 2007a).

Learner-generated contexts are created by learners taking ownership of their learning needs and environments (Luckin, *et al*, 2007). Community participants actively engage in dialogic learning networks where information and knowledge are exchanged in order to stimulate individual and community learning alike. In this way the learning processes produce effective, interesting and creative opportunities that often differ on each occasion and from which the outcomes can be applied as, or to, effective community action (Day, 2009; Day, 2008 and Day & Farenden, 2007b).

Community learning partnerships

When the funding for CNA, supplied through the Economic & Social Research Council (ESRC) ran out, we were able to sustain the community development ethos of CNA collaborations through support in the short-term by the Community University Partnership Project (CUPP)³ at the University of Brighton. This was only ever going to be a stay of execution however, so we started to take stock of the assets we possessed and reflected on what could realistically be achieved with these.

The remaining assets could be understood as the following: 1) Excellent community development workers in West Hove, Portslade & latterly Moulsecoomb⁴. It was their buying into the vision of how CI can contribute to community development activities that has provided a firm base for our activities, even when they don't always work out....and they don't. 2) The enthusiasm, thirst for knowledge and commitment of the various community fora/committee folk and, 3) great students who seem to develop as scholars, every year, by actively engaging with the networks, activities and issues that exist in community environments. To say nothing of the fun they have in doing it....and whoever said learning shouldn't be fun?

It should also be said that we have been inspired in no small part by the great example set by the CI Corps at the University of Illinois – see for example the Ask, Investigate, Create, Discuss & Reflect model (Nelson & Bishop, 2007), which set us to thinking about the way in which we engage with community. As we reflected on how such assets could be utilised to develop and sustain our existing community partnership activities – let alone respond to the demand to build new partnerships⁵ – a creative, flexible and innovative idea about community learning partnerships began to emerge.

³ See <http://www.brighton.ac.uk/cupp/>

⁴ Residential neighbourhoods in Brighton and Hove.

⁵ Earlier this summer we were approached by the community development worker from the neighbourhood of Moulsecoomb to explore ways in which community informatics/media might support community development activities there.

We started by linking the goal of informal community learning partnerships to the formal framework of higher education pedagogy. Drawing initially on the US based approach of service learning (Abravanel, 2003 & McPherson, 2005), we are developing what we term community-based learning⁶ in the curriculum. We set out to develop modules⁷ that actively contribute both to 1) community life and informal learning by community partners and, 2) the formal learning and social knowledge of students through community informatics/media partnership projects planned through dialogue and negotiation between students and community. It is the intended purpose of partnership projects that “both sides benefit through the activities, and usually involves having a shared vision, regular two-way communication, independent tasks, and common goals” (Billig, 2007, p.27).

For community partners much of the learning focuses on the processes outlined above (see Nielsen and Packham). Of course, there is also an element of skills development in which students share their knowledge, experience and expertise as part of the project brief. In this way not only are the capacities of our community partners developed⁸ so that they can apply these new skills in achieving a community action goal, but they can assist others in the community to develop their capacities as well. Capacity building in the CI context is both practice and process oriented and should always be driven by community development goals.

All community informatics/media modules in the School of Arts and Media at the University of Brighton are electives and most run for a single semester, but final year undergraduate students can enrol for the community project module, as well as selecting to undertake a piece of applied community-based research as their dissertation subject. This means that some students dedicate 50% of their final year studies to community informatics/media related subjects. The same applies at the Masters level, where students can take a theory-based module and then supplement that with a practice-based community media module before undertaking their dissertation as community-based research.

Because these elective modules all form part of Media Studies degrees the range of skills, knowledge and interests found among students is wide but highly appropriate in supporting community content production – photography, video, journalism, PR, marketing, html, image editing, and digital story-telling are among the subjects in which students have assisted community partners in learning. Of course, as with all student work, quality varies. Sometimes the outcomes are excellent and students make significant contributions to community learning, capacity building and community development. On other occasions the outputs are not so good and students act more like community helpers requiring a lot of supervision and assistance from our community partners. This is fully understood and accepted by the community partners. In the main however, the partnerships work well and

Moulsecob is one of the most socially excluded communities in the South-east of England and a number of introductory PLWs were held in September 2009. We have also been approached by a partnership in sustainable development in rural communities to explore ways in which the CNA model of community learning, networking and technology can be utilised to support their activities.

⁶ We use *community-based* learning rather than *service* to describe the modules. The term *service* has connotations of benefactors *doing to* beneficiaries, when we wish to focus on partnerships of learning and development in which activities are undertaken together or with partners.

⁷ Modules are units of learning per semester, often known as courses in other parts of the world.

⁸ We will explore some of the practical examples of this in a CI context in the next section.

even the less dynamic and innovative students manage to contribute to community activities in some way and learn from the process at the same time.

For students, learning goals are driven primarily by the demands of the module assessment criteria. In other words they want to gain a good grade in the module and so seek to gain knowledge about the synergies between community media/informatics practices and community development related theories. Of course they also soon realise that they learn about themselves and other people – often in environments that they have never encountered before. They learn about community, civil society, civic responsibility, project management, negotiation and dialogue. They also learn about learning, often gaining insights about themselves from the challenges they have faced. From this point forward many gain in confidence and their overall performance improves – not just in these modules but across their degree performance. As an educator, it is a source of eternal pride seeing my students often exceed their own expectations and going on to achieve further upon graduation.

A model of community learning partnerships (CLPs) – as if people mattered

Fundamental to the success of the community learning partnerships is dialogic action. That is to say that each stage of the learning partnership process (below) is driven by actions and activities determined by regular and ongoing dialogue between community, students, community development workers and academic staff (faculty). This is crucial in order to achieve and maintain shared vision and common ground within the partnerships (Billig, 2007) although establishing an environment in which people with busy lives and competing external demands can come together in dialogue is not always practicable. It can however, become more accessible through the use of shared ICT platforms. Until recently, we found the social network site, Ning, to be the most adaptable to our needs. It had the main advantage of avoiding the University's firewall and security problems encountered with trying to enable community access to University information systems.

However, we had been considering switching to the CMS platform Plone, because the community prototype websites we constructed during the CNA projects used this platform and had worked well. This created an added advantage of students and community only having to learn one platform and recent developments to Plone make it much more intuitive and, in our experience, simpler to learn than other platforms the communities had experimented with. The decision by Ning to start charging premium rates was the catalyst for the decision. Consequently, all the community websites that we are working on and the student learning spaces I have developed are all built using Plone. Students learn how to use the learning space as part of their module learning objectives and are then in a position, when collaborating with community partners in generating community media content, to train community participants in uploading their content and using the website. In this way, the community becomes the curriculum (*Nelson & Bishop, 2007*) by stimulating the production, archiving and consumption of community media content.

The remainder of this paper explores the stages of the CLP model which evolved from the CNA projects and is being refined through the kind of student/community partnership

activities identified below. The CLP model comprises five iterative components or stages.: community engagement; problem assessment; solution planning; solution creation and critical reflection. Each stage of the cycle is underpinned by dialogic action, I.e. through the active participation of partners.



Fig. 1 - Stages of the community learning partnership (CLP) process

Engage

Community informatics partnership projects vary year on year and are determined by a number of factors. Student skill-set, knowledgebase and interests (groups or individuals) play a determining role in the type of projects undertaken but all projects must be driven by community need. Students are free to identify and negotiate the nature and aims of projects for themselves, so long as they are located within one of our partnering communities. However, because most modules only run for a 12 week period, projects are normally drawn from a list prepared through discussions with community development workers and the community forum.

Initial student engagement with potential community partners usually comes through an introduction to the community development worker and/or Chairperson of the community forum, usually as part of an informal get together where introductions are facilitated by the author and the potential for project collaboration explored. Subsequent negotiations between students and community hammer out an agreement on the nature and goals of the project. This is never as simple as it might sound and in 2009 a digital story-telling project provided a classic example of this. 2 students were invited by the manager of the North Portslade Children’s Centre to work on a digital story-telling project in which parents could tell their stories about issues and problems of parenting in Portslade, which would then be loaded up onto the Portslade Community Communications Space (CCS) on pages dedicated to the Centre.

Assess

We found that the noise level at the Children’s Centre, where children run around enjoying themselves (loudly) and parents socialising with one eye on their offspring was not really an

environment conducive to running participatory learning workshops in digital story-telling techniques. In addition, the parents had not really been prepared properly for the arrival of the students and although everyone knew they were coming, no-one really understood why, apart from that it had 'something to do with ICT'. The students not only had to completely revise their plans for the digital story workshops (more later) but had to develop a strategy by which they could engage with parents and convince them to engage with the project. Initially, this was done by chatting to parents and the response was mixed. There was some interest but people really didn't understand the concept of digital story-telling.

After a feedback session at the university, in which we reflected critically on the experiences of the day and considered the lessons about the student's preparation and assumptions about the project, the students returned the following week with visual display boards that they had designed to show what a digital story was and how to story-board and make one. They also took a laptop with a brief story they had made and kept it playing on loop. Throughout the morning interest grew and people signed up to engage in the project.

Although much of the partnership projects focus on content production, the intention is for content to be uploaded and managed on the community website. In Moulsecoomb, initial discussions about the community website structure and content have focussed on the information and communication needs of the Moulsecoomb Local Action Team (MLAT⁹). Eventually, it is hoped that the site will be expanded to act as a community communication space for the entire Moulsecoomb community.

In a previous year, a group of final year media students undertook a community needs assessment in the centre of Portslade. A random sample of 250 people was surveyed providing some interesting insights into the demographics of ICT access and use in Portslade. The questionnaire confirmed interest in the development of an effective community website and provided data about community content requirements. The results of the survey were written up in a community friendly and accessible report form, which was given to the Portslade Community Forum and produced in hard copy for distribution among groups in the forum. Students undertook similar research in West Hove with outputs tailored to meet the needs of that community. Changes in the personal circumstances of researchers and community champions put a temporary block on activities in Portslade and West Hove. It is not clear whether activities will start up again although there has been some exploration of the possibility. Meanwhile, the working relationship with the Moulsecoomb community and ITSkills4RuralKenya (ITS4RK)¹⁰ has strengthened and these will be reported in future papers.

Plan

Reflecting critically on the findings of the surveys and interviews with key stakeholders in the community forum, the students resolved that planning was needed for an awareness raising campaign in the community if the CCS was to contribute to community development by becoming a thriving space for community communications. Analysing the research for

⁹ MLAT is a neighbourhood action group in Moulsecoomb attended by local residents and various agencies in the locale with the aim of creating and sustaining active and healthy community. Local Action Teams are a UK government initiative. For further details see <http://www.safeinthecity.info/?q=neighbourhoods/lats>

¹⁰ See <http://www.itskills4ruralkenya.org/>

indicators of community needs the students produced a 'framework for sustainability' document intended to provide guidance and to support the community forum in developing a community information and communications strategy. The students produced a range of recommendations that not only inform the next tranche of PLWs and support community awareness raising activities but also provide useful insights into the importance of social engagement as part of the community communication space.

In addition to this, having identified the priorities articulated by the community from the questionnaire, the students planned and produced a series of 'how to' work books. Each work book introduces new community users to the initial stages of using the Plone based community website – e.g. how to become a member; how to create a personal and/or group folder and pages; how to create a community calendar event; and how to create a community news article. Using screen shots to accompany the written guidelines, users are taken step-by-step through each introductory stage of using the community website as a content producer rather than a passive service user. The purpose behind workbook production and dissemination was to provide a resource that *empowered* community users to produce and manage their own online information and communications, albeit at introductory level in this instance. To this end, workbooks will be posted on the CCS as ongoing community learning resources.

This year, final year undergrad students are preparing for a community media research fieldtrip to the rural village of Kibugat in Kenya. 3 former CI students – 2 Masters and 1 undergrad – set up the charity, ITS4RK based in both Brighton and Kibugat resulting in an ICT Centre being established in Kibugat and a network to establish 195 others throughout rural Kenya. The purpose of the fieldtrip will be to undertake a community profile of community assets and needs. Working with ITS4RK volunteers in Brighton and Hove, students are currently designing a participatory communications strategy (Mefalopulos & Kamlongera, 2004) to amend and implement with villagers during the fieldtrip. PLWs will also be incorporated into this methodological in order to train local trainers in research methods; digital mediation of data collection and story-telling and community blogging through the Plone interface. When and if these plans come to fruition depend on how successful the students are in raising the funds to finance the research trip. We have no access to philanthropic funds but the students are excited by the prospect and are keen to make their plans reality. If the plans are successful the research results will be written up as a report authored by myself and participating students. If the fundraising activities are not successful then all monies raised will be donated to ITS4RK and the research will be undertaken next year.

Create

Community media/informatics practices can, when applied as part of a community development portfolio of organisation, activities and action, unleash a creative potential, often unrealised in the pressures of everyday life. It is one of the most wonderful things about working with people in communities that quite ordinary people are capable of quite extraordinary things when given the support and confidence to "have a go" and achieve. For example, parents from the North Portslade Children's Centre produced 4 digital stories, some intended to be used to raise awareness of and profile the Centre itself and another about the activities at the community allotment. One parent, who joined the project near its

end, was considering using the techniques she learnt to produce a story for other parents about coping with childhood Eczema.

During their time at the Children's Centre the two students overcame considerable odds to plan and implement an effective community learning environment. They engaged with parents in a manner that stimulated their desire to participate in learning how to represent and promote *community voice*. All parents when subsequently questioned revealed that they would use the skills they had learnt both in their personal lives and to support the community if and when the need arose. This amounts to a not inconsiderable newly acquired skill-set, as the students showed parents how to storyboard and create narrative for stories. They also provided an introduction to digital photography using Photo Voice techniques and parents were then shown how to synthesise this knowledge into the production of a digital story by using Windows Movie Maker.

Another pair of students planned and executed a PLW in which community leaders learnt how to edit digital images and then how to create posters to promote and advertise community events and activities using Photoshop. In both sets of workshop environments, participants reflected critically on how the knowledge they were gaining could be used to support their community, indeed a number of posters were subsequently produced to promote community events in West Hove and Portslade. In both the Photoshop and digital story projects students produced 'how to' workbooks that could be used as a community resource in the future. Similar workshops and training documentations are being planned and designed for PLWs in Moulsecoomb and Kenya.

Reflect

It is important to note that despite the representation in Fig.1 reflection does not only occur at the end of a project, although critical evaluation by students and community alike is especially important to ongoing initiatives such as the CLPs. Critical reflection between all partners is conducted during each project stage. Sometimes this takes the form of a simple conversation whilst at other times the reflective dialogue is more ongoing and formal, this is where project communication platforms have proven useful with students, although using them effectively can be a bit of a challenge, especially with students eager to impress their assessors.

Reflective conversations between participants, in which the activities and their contextual relevance are critically discussed, are built into PLW design and are important elements of the learning process of student and community participants alike. In the digital story workshops, parents were invited to reflect on the activities, their stories and what these meant to them, and how these skills could be utilized in the future. These reflections were captured in an evaluation questionnaire and contributed to the student's final year dissertation (Timson, 2009). The online learning environments developed for students present other interesting challenges, e.g. students are often inclined to contribute what they think their assessor wants to hear. This does occur, especially during the early weeks of student engagement in community informatics/media modules. However, working in and with communities is fraught with complexity and things often simply don't go to plan.

Plainly put outreach activities can and do go wrong. Students don't get marked down for this. In this sense there is no right and wrong, engaging with real live communities can be complicated and challenging. Students learn very quickly that the instructor is aware of this and that how they deal with these challenges; how they engage in dialogic action; the lessons they learn; and the rigour of their synthesis of practice and theory are the things that are assessed. Students are encouraged to learn collaboratively and soon understand that the online learning space provides a safe and unthreatening environment in which they can share experiences and reflect critically on what they've learnt.

Student evaluation of these modules is always high and colleagues who moderate these modules have found that they get so engrossed in the deliberations of the students that an intended hour's moderation soon becomes 4 or 5 hours. The external examiners of the associated degrees always praise the content of the student dialogue and this year the University honoured with an award for 'empowering and facilitating excellence in learning', a moment of great personal pride as the award was made at the student graduation ceremony.

Conclusion

The most significant evidence emerging from these partnerships is the support they give to the argument that the participation, networking, communication and knowledge sharing activities and processes that occur when using ICT as part of community learning assist in building capacity and capability – empowering individuals and community alike.

The model of community learning partnerships, which is being developed as part of the community informatics curriculum at the University of Brighton, is presented here within the context of community empowerment. That is to say that even with little or no financial resources Higher Education institutions can: 1) engage in constructive dialogue with communities; 2) make themselves more accessible to the communities in which they are located; 3) support and sustain community development activities; 4) stimulate community learning; and 5) incorporate exciting curricular developments that contribute to knowledge development and learning.

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