

Learning From Seniors in Network Communities

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ABSTRACT

We conducted an ethnographic study of SeniorNet, an organization focused on helping seniors gain access to computing technology. Our research examines the social and cultural context of access to computing, with a particular focus on the role of community. Our study of SeniorNet has helped us understand the nature of seniors as a group, as we have immersed ourselves in the uniquely supportive and cohesive communities of SeniorNet. At the same time, our stereotypes of seniors have been challenged as we have come to understand the diversity that the category of "senior" so incompletely describes. This diversity has implications for how we approach access issues for the senior population and as we consider the benefits of computing for seniors as well as benefits for others in interacting with seniors.

Keywords

Seniors, SeniorNet, network community, Internet access, home computing

INTRODUCTION

As part of our interest in the issue of broad access to computers and the Internet, we have carried out a year-long ethnographic study of SeniorNet, an organization that supports senior citizens in gaining access to computing [2]. In the network communities and classes sponsored by SeniorNet, we saw many examples of successful and fluent uses of computers, with seniors helping other seniors to become comfortable and effective online. The SeniorNet case provides a model of how a supportive community can foster access to technology.

Seniors are commonly characterized as technology-naive or even averse to technology, preferring traditional methods for their communication needs. Because most seniors are of retirement age, they are also supposed by many younger adults to have a great deal of free time. However, we found that the seniors we met in our study challenged common

stereotypes—we were not aware that we subscribed to some of these stereotypes until we saw them contradicted.

The SeniorNet network communities are robust and rich. The seniors, with the support of SeniorNet staff, have created sustainable communities over a long period of time and through many technological changes. Online participation in a network community is a motivating and rewarding activity for many seniors and an effective way to support people as they learn to use technology.

THE SENIORNET PROJECT

The SeniorNet organization was founded twelve years ago to help seniors gain access to computing technology. SeniorNet began by bringing seniors together on the Delphi online service in 1986, followed by a migration to America On-Line (AOL) in 1991. SeniorNet began a new network community on the Web in 1997, seeded by volunteers from the AOL community. Today, SeniorNet supports both the Web and AOL network communities, and it sponsors over a hundred volunteer-staffed Learning Centers throughout the United States, where seniors can take classes on a variety of subjects, including how to buy a computer, how to use financial software, and how to get online. Currently, there are about 25,000 SeniorNet members.

We chose to study SeniorNet as a case of long-lived, successful computer access among a population which is not commonly thought to be adept at learning new technologies. The themes of our research have centered on understanding the social and technical features that support access and help people become fluent in online participation.

SeniorNet is a distributed enterprise, with activity in different online and physical locations. We carried out observations and interviews in several sites. We interviewed SeniorNet staff members, observed Learning Center classes, observed online activity on the Web and AOL over a period of months, participated in chat, and interviewed about 40 SeniorNet members.

CHALLENGING STEREOTYPES

In our earlier work, we pointed out that successful network communities require a sense of membership and identity in the community [1]. That is, a community needs boundaries,

and members should understand community boundaries so they will have a sense of “groupness” or belonging.

In the network communities of SeniorNet, we saw that there was a strong sense of groupness related to people’s common experience of being a senior, but at the same time the seniors were not willing to be boxed into a “senior” category. Though they were drawn to SeniorNet because they enjoyed interacting with other seniors, being a senior did not define or bound their identities.

The seniors cited several reasons for preferring SeniorNet to other online settings, including common interests, maturity of other participants, and a sense of civility that far exceeded what they encountered elsewhere on the net. Many seniors considered this civility a feature of their generation. Indeed, in our observations online, we noticed a remarkable level of friendliness and support among community members.

The discussion forums showed that age-related interests were relevant in bringing people together in SeniorNet. There were forum topics on areas of shared historical interest (World War II) and health issues (Alzheimer’s caregivers, knees and hips), as well as forum topics of general interest, such as literature, finance, and religion.

Although common interests and interaction styles brought these seniors together, there was great diversity in the communities we studied. This diversity may come as a surprise to younger adults. As one senior told us, “Some of the youth today do not understand us. They categorize us in one lump image. Not so, and we as seniors know it. Each day is the day I again start to live...”

SeniorNet membership was available to anyone over 50, but this left an age range of over 40 years, which is larger than any other age-related category (children, teens, boomers). Some people were still working, others had recently retired, and others had left the work world long ago. Some were physically active, and others had physical limitations that restricted their mobility. SeniorNet members had an extensive breadth of interests, experience, and needs. The diversity of these communities was part of their strength, since it allowed people to explore common ground with a variety of others through different facets of their lives.

DIVERSE FORMS OF ACCESS

The seniors we met were not hesitant learners. They showed a zest for online experience, and they brought motivation and energy to their uses of technology, even when they experienced physical difficulties. They emphasized the importance of frequent practice to become adept with computers, just as one would have to practice a sport or musical instrument. It was hard for many of the seniors we interviewed to find time to practice online, as they had busy schedules and many commitments. One senior we met regretted that she no longer had as much time to practice as she had had in her working days.

We began our research with a feeling that seniors were a disenfranchised group with respect to technology. As we have discovered the diversity of seniors’ uses and needs for technology, we have realized that efforts to make computing accessible to seniors must address this diversity.

Seniors as a whole cannot be considered technophobic or disenfranchised with respect to technology. The online communities of SeniorNet show that many seniors are avid and expert users of computers, and in many ways they are a privileged group by virtue of their life experiences and flexible schedules after retirement. Our work at the Learning Centers, by contrast, enabled us to observe barriers to access for seniors as they approach computers for the first time. Our observations across multiple sites helped us identify the variety of literacy issues that are involved in the use of computers and online resources. Access is not only a matter of physical and economic accessibility and usability in the technical sense. Access also involves entering into complex social and cultural contexts and developing multiple competencies that enable people to make sense and productive use of computers and networked worlds.

SUSTAINABLE COMMUNITY

One of the most noticeable aspects of SeniorNet was the quality of support people offered one another. They often helped each other with technology problems, even in discussion forums not intended for that purpose.

Community members also offered each other support in other areas of life. For example, people discussing health issues exchanged tips about treatment protocols, new drugs, and information resources, and they offered encouragement, sympathy, and stories from their own lives. The seniors also engaged in debate, intellectual discussion, and romance.

All of us have a good deal to learn from seniors. Part of the mission statement of SeniorNet is to help seniors share their wisdom, not only with other seniors but also with people who are not yet seniors. Yet the cohesiveness and liveliness of the SeniorNet communities were due in part to the “groupness” of being senior—younger adults or children could not participate in those particular communities without changing them. The SeniorNet experience suggests several questions to pursue: how can more of these communities come into existence, to contribute to seniors’ quality of life and promote their access to technology? And how can seniors interact online with younger people in ways that are rewarding for all?

REFERENCES

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