

Creating a Community Technology Center for Homeless Young People: Preliminary Experience Report

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ABSTRACT

This workshop paper describes a community technology center which is being developed for homeless young people aged 13-25 in Seattle, WA, U.S.A. The center seeks to strike a balance, offering young people, on the one hand, technology and knowledge for improved communication and interaction within the homeless community. On the other hand, it also seeks to equip young people with sensibilities and skills for stabilizing their situations and leaving homelessness. The design and development of the center has been shaped by seven ecological considerations, which are presented in a provisional framework, under three main categories: i) Societal forces; ii) Life on the street; and iii) Work in service programs. The framework should be helpful to designers who seek to develop socio-technical systems for homeless young people.

Keywords

Homeless young people, community technology center, ecological considerations

INTRODUCTION

For about the last 18 months we have been investigating the design and use of information systems by homeless young people, people aged 13 – 25 [6]. These people live in and around the City of Seattle, Washington, U.S.A., and access social services run by non-profit organizations, which are located within a nine-block urban environment, known as the University District, near the University of Washington. Specifically, we seek to develop knowledge for how to design information systems that are useful to homeless young people.

Taking a design stance, we conceptualize “useful” in two principle ways. First, information systems can be judged useful to the degree that they help young people stabilize their situations and improve their welfare while being homeless, defined as living without a regular nighttime residence. Under this view, it is assumed that being homeless is a legitimate way of being, and the goal for information systems, whether digital or non-digital, is to improve the health, safety, and welfare of homeless people or to enhance their abilities to communicate within the homeless culture and to engage with social and

governmental institutions (e.g., the Department of Social and Health Services). Consistent with this view, for example, a design initiative could address the scarcity of access to personal digital technology, which most homeless young people experience daily, develop young people’s fluency with digital technology, and develop young people’s knowledge for effective online ways of being (e.g., consciously shaping one’s online identities for different constituents).

Alternatively, information systems can be judged useful to the degree that they position homeless young people to leave homelessness. Under this view, homelessness is seen as a deficiency, that is, as a problem that needs to be corrected. Here, information systems are seen largely as a remedy in that they equip young people with information and skills for escaping homelessness and for participating in mainstream society. Consistent with this view, for example, is the construction of organizing schemes for brochures and fliers on a bulletin board, a common kind of paper-based information system, which allows staff and volunteers to interact with youth at the entrances of drop-in centers [6]. Additional examples include developing information systems that help homeless young people develop skills for creating resumes, for applying for jobs, for ethically responding to employment questionnaires, and for accessing governmental services.

Side-by-side, these two views – homelessness as a legitimate way of living and homelessness as a problem to be corrected – reflect a common tension that runs through much of the literature on homelessness. James Spradley was one of the first to describe homelessness as a culture and to examine the possibility that it can be seen as an acceptable way of life [5]. More recently, therapeutic approaches that seek to address the homeless “problem” have made the case that stabilizing youth and improving their welfare is an effective way to go forward [1, 4]. In this project, we have sought to balance this tension, honoring the identities of homeless young people, while also positioning young people to develop skills for leaving homelessness. These two views, we shall see, are not entirely incompatible.

In this workshop paper we report on the design and initial use of a community technology center for homeless young

people, focusing on insights and reflections developed while acting as consultants. Next, we introduce the center.

COMMUNITY TECHNOLOGY CENTER

The Participants: Homeless Young People

The community technology center was designed for young people aged 13-25 who are either homeless or street-involved and who attend programs provided by youth-centered service agencies in the University District. These programs, which are open at varying times during the day and week, seek to fulfill the basic needs of homeless young people by offering health care, food, shelter and respite from the street, and function as venues for meeting case managers, social workers with specialized training in the provision of care for homeless young people. The community technology center is housed within a drop-in center, one of the service agency programs; a place already known to homeless young people. In partnership with two service agency staff, we teach classes, as part of the *New Tech for Youth Sessions*, where we have come into close contact with fifteen homeless young men and women, some who attended three participatory workshops and some who have participated as students in the classes.

So far, the participating students have been young men between the ages of 18 and 25, either Caucasian, Native American or mixed race, who speak English as a first language. All of the young men have used email applications, maintain active MySpace pages, and have a strong interest in listening to and sharing music. Many have graduated from high school (through Grade 12), an accomplishment usually achieved by 18-year olds, and a few have completed college courses (Grade 13 or 14). However, school completion is not necessarily indicative of skill acquisition or developmental level. Student's reading and writing abilities, their knowledge regarding personal computers, and their ability to engage in small group discussions and presentations fall within a wide spectrum, with the lowest level of ability most likely falling below the Grade 9 level.

Since the University District is a small neighborhood, the young men know each other and the two staff who work at the drop-in center, who teach the sessions along with the authors. Some of the young men have formed friendships and support each other in daily activities, including, for example, helping each other arrive at class on time, which can be a significant undertaking for some of the young men. These friendships seem to be reinforced by commonalities in style of dress. Styles of dress range from fairly conventional fashions, typified by a long-sleeve shirt and sweater, waterproof jacket, waterproof backpack, and sturdy footwear, to styles reflecting punk and anarchist orientations, typified by black clothes, black leather jacket, bicycle courier bag, body piercings, tattoos, and sports shoes.

The young men have high energy levels and well-developed senses of humor, enjoying word play, jokes, and pranks.

Some of the young men have learning or health challenges, including developmental delay, congenital anomaly, mental illness, and chronic substance abuse. For instance, the young men's on-going chronic substance abuse makes it difficult for many of them to attend during a 90-minute class without a break to smoke a cigarette, and there are times when students have come to class having just ingested alcohol or other drugs.

The Physical Space: A Drop-in Place

With a grant from the Community Technology Opportunities Program, sponsored by the State of Washington for one year starting in the summer of 2008, we are creating a technology center for homeless young people. The technology center is not a dedicated, single-use facility; rather, it is located in a church basement that is used as a drop-in center, which is opened daily from 7:30 – 9:00 P.M. and at other times. Within the basement is a rack of used clothes, free personal hygiene items, movable tables and chairs, shelves of books, a computer which is secured against theft within a metal kiosk, and a media area which is opened at certain times for watching television, and playing video games. The basement also has a restroom and a small office, with storage areas, a refrigerator, containers for food, a counter for food preparation, and a sitting area. The sitting area is often used for private meetings between service agency staff and young people.

A "tech space" was created along one of the basement walls. This space consists of a long counter, which holds two computer workstations and a printer. In addition, a fileserver and eight laptop computers are available. When not in use, the laptops are stored in a locked cabinet in the small office. At present, the tech space is available only to young people who have completed a sequence of six beginning classes.

The Curriculum: New Tech for Youth Sessions

We have developed a curriculum, called *New Tech for Youth Sessions*, which invites homeless young people to develop basic computer skills and sensibilities by creating materials useful for finding a job. The curriculum is divided into the following six classes: 1) Introduction and greetings; 2) "Pimp" your resume; 3) Presenting well online and offline; 4) Finding a job; 5) The application process; and 6) End game. The classes are designed for 5-8 students, with each student supplied with a laptop, with 2-4 instructors (for one-on-one assistance). The design of the current iteration of the curriculum has been informed by three participatory workshops (called "think tanks" by young people) and a pilot class that had to be stopped after three sessions because of lack of student interest.

In each 90-minute class, students create documents or other artifacts that are useful for finding a job. In the first class, for example, students are asked to write 2-3 paragraphs that describe a "dream job which they would like to obtain within 2 years." Once most students have a first draft, the students are prompted to transform their writings into

posters by including images and by making use of font size, color, style and other typographical features and layout. As students work on this task, the instructors give one-on-one instruction on the use of basic word processing features. Once students are finished with their posters, they are asked to present them to the class and describe what they did and how. While optional, we encourage all students to present their posters, as a way to develop their self-confidence to talk about themselves in a group. The class ends with a summary and two things to think about prior to the next class.

At the first class, we introduce and discuss four key rules which were determined with the input of staff and young people during the participatory workshops: 1) Don't abuse the computers; 2) Stay focused; 3) Be respectful of others; and 4) Build on others. These rules set the overarching spirit for the sessions. In addition, students are assigned a laptop (each laptop is named), and given a pen and a portfolio for holding handouts and notes. In subsequent classes, when students arrive they pick up their portfolios and laptops, both stored at the drop-in for safe-keeping. Typically, while settling in at the beginning of class, students show each other their MySpace pages, or videos that they have found on the Internet, or listen to each other's favorite music.

As students progress through the six classes they are given incentives to continue – a 2 gigabyte thumb drive, 'free time' to use the laptops during the drop-in program which takes place immediately after each of the classes, a gift card for iTunes, and finally an iPod music player. The music player has a very high status for young people and appears to be a strong motivator for staying with the classes. (Yet, incidentally, in a pilot version of the class, the promise of iPods failed to motivate students to complete six classes – 5 out of 5 students stopped coming after the third class.) The music player also rewards young people for a job well done, helps to spread the word on the street about *The New Tech for Youth Sessions*, requires youth to look after a delicate device, and gives youth the means to participate in everyday experiences – shopping for music, sharing music, listening to music while walking or riding the bus, and so on – that would otherwise not be available to them.

ECOLOGICAL CONSIDERATIONS FOR DESIGN

The community technology center – consisting of the physical space, computers and software applications, curriculum, instructors and young people – just described, is a particular socio-technical system. Our evolving understanding of the general problem space and the specific design of the community technology center has been shaped by seven ecological considerations. These considerations, we believe, will be prominent in most, if not all, information system design projects that seek to engage homeless young people; for example, mobile phone applications, public electronic kiosks, and online resources.

Table 1. Organizing scheme for ecological considerations

A. Societal Forces	A1. Scarcity of Personal Digital Technology	<i>B. Life on the Street</i>
		B1. Desire for freedom B2. Vulnerability B3. Public perceptions
		<i>C. Work in Service Programs</i>
		C1. Youth-adult relationships C2. Desire for conformity C3. Goal-setting orientation

Table 1 offers a provisional scheme for organizing these considerations. In it, we distinguish between broad societal forces (A), from day to day *life* on the street (B), from *work* for leaving the street (C). Within this ternary structure, tensions, constraints and opportunities arise for design. Next, we discuss some of the most salient features of these ecological considerations.

A. Societal Forces. Personal digital technology is a scarce resource for homeless young people (A1) due to the initial and ongoing costs of ownership (e.g., service plans and maintenance). While access to personal computers at public libraries is common, access is typically restricted to 30 minutes, and requires a library card or other form of identification [3], which young people sometimes lack. In addition, young people cannot store their documents reliably on public computers, making it difficult to complete ongoing projects, like preparing a resume.

The community technology center reduces scarcity by providing young people with access to digital technology at a suitable place. Young people can use computers for more than 30 minutes at a time and can save their work to their own account on the fileserver. Young people also gain knowledge about digital technology and skills for using the technology in the *New Tech for Youth Sessions*.

B. Life on the Street. Young people experience freedom (B1) in their time living on the street which heightens their vulnerability (B2). People come and go and there are friends to be made, but the person who at first appears to be an ally may turn out to have malicious intentions. A drug dealer, for example, may invite or coerce a young person to sell drugs in exchange for resources such as money or a place to sleep. In addition, through the chaos and excitement of the street, young people can easily lose their belongings, due to inattention or theft. Similarly, when young people congregate and socialize in busy public places they can be seen as engaging in asocial behavior by other people in the community, such as pedestrians, business owners, and police officers (B3). As another example, young people are kept from camping in public parks, or living in abandoned buildings by law and local customs [2]. Indeed, these activities, directed at securing a basic need (i.e., sleeping), leave young people vulnerable to

arrest, incarceration and associated legal problems. These experiences, in turn, can make young people resentful of societal norms and lead to distinctive questioning and resistance towards civility laws designed to control public behavior.

The way that the community technology center addresses these considerations is twofold. First, the curriculum builds young people's skills and increases their knowledge for the use of technology. An integral outcome of this work is the development of life skills, particularly self-confidence, and interpersonal communication. Second, building on this initial learning, the community technology center will position young people to engage in information system design projects which will benefit young people themselves and the larger community. For instance, young people could design and build a web site that provides a forum for discussing the problems and challenges that they face. Young people may also work in conjunction with other community members on joint information design projects, such as an information bicycle, a three-wheeled freight-bearing bicycle that carries digital technology and paper-based information resources throughout the University District.

C. Work in Service Programs. Service programs, like the one that occurs each evening in the drop-in center where the community technology center is located, provide a place where young people can find respite from the street, get food, clothes and hygiene supplies, and form relationships with service providers, who may be adult staff or volunteers (C1). This appropriately structured environment [4], where service providers work with young people to engender conformity in young people's lives (C2) in order to establish routines and behaviors that are helpful for moving out of homelessness, can be at odds with the freedom that young people experience in their life on the street. When access to digital technology becomes available for young people under the oversight of the drop-in program, service providers mediate technology access in order to help young people set and attain desirable but difficult goals (C3), such as securing identification or finding a job. For instance, service providers may discourage young people from social networking, via email and sites such as MySpace, since service providers often view these activities as largely inappropriate and unrelated to goals.

The development of the curriculum and the design of the community technology center intentionally incorporate the inputs of service providers and homeless young people, creating a balance between freedom and work in a place where young people can enjoy access to digital technology while also making progress toward goals. For instance, while the 90-minute class time is spent on learning skills and accomplishing goals (e.g., working toward getting a job by learning to use Word and then preparing a resume), students have free time during the drop-in program. During

free time, students can spend up to an hour using the class computers to pursue their own interests (e.g., sharing music, playing games, sending email, and so on).

REFLECTION

We began by considering two ways that an information system can be useful to homeless young people. A system can be useful by assisting young people in their lives while they are homeless, and it can also be useful by positioning homeless young people to leave homelessness. Through careful analysis and incorporation of the ecological considerations regarding societal forces, life on the street and work in service programs, the community technology center is not just a place where young people can get access to a computer! Rather, the community technology center has emerged as a socio-technical system built to be useful in both ways. Moving forward, this brand new place where young people can access technology, gain technical skills, and create their own design projects, may provide important opportunities for homeless young people to interact with each other and with the community.

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