Learning through Internet

by Jo Sutton

Sometimes a person who goes on the Internet feels as if they are part of a huge group who all went to school together. Whatever differences, those of us learning the new communications technologies have a lot in common. It's a topic of conversation at the counter in our local hardware store, or when I meet a 10- or 90-year-old, or when my only other choice of conversation with near-strangers would have been the weather. Suddenly we're swapping stories, opinions and information. Each of us knows what the other has experienced because we have that experience in common. Sometimes we are able to cross social barriers with much greater ease than usual. We live in a time when potentially a large proportion of the population has learned, or will learn, how to use the Internet. Getting online is a social experience shared by millions, taking place over a short period of time.

Once we're there, wherever there may be in cyberspace, we become part of discovering what we can do with our new set of tools. Investigation, sometimes including play, becomes a learning experience. Being able to send a first E-mail, the wait-and-see if it really got there and if that person will write back before we get too impatient, is something many of us have in common. Then comes being able to join mailing lists, writing to people who might want our vote one day and should be listening now, being able to give and receive support, ideas, information. We start to apply this tool each in our own way, according to our priorities and interests.

Just like school, how well we learn is not so dependent on our intellect as on our motivation. As any kid in the back row knows, motivation is key to learning. Along with a good teacher who knows how to tap into making us want to

learn. Which is why "training" someone to use the information technologies is only half of the picture. Training implies a skill set. In this case things such as using a mouse and keyboard, knowing where to find the modem's telephone jack on the back of the computer, and where the local Internet service provider can be found. All necessary to give us the skills, but first we need to know why someone would want to learn to use the Internet in the first place.

Although finding information on the Internet is a key part of how it is developing, it is the communications aspect which is most important. Part of learning is interacting with other people, first having someone to guide you through getting started, then being able to show off a little of what you know. The interaction can be both on- and off-line, as it's the feedback and testing out what you know in another context that are important. Collecting information, whether it's

information and some exploration. People can then come to the next session with questions and achievements. It takes confidence and flexibility on the part of the person doing the teaching, as the unexpected is certain to appear.

Learning can continue online, as there are plenty of Web sites with courses on every aspect of the Internet. Sometimes a mentor can offer help, or someone can join a mailing list for newbies. This offers personal support for

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Whether organising a quilt pattern or a campaign, people have to want to learn when we introduce them to getting online. We need to find what is going to appeal to them and keep them fascinated. This means being able to encourage people to talk about what most interests them, and being able to find something online which matches and sparks their interests. In a group setting or workplace there still needs to be that connection to the individual and the things she cares about most.

When we got online we found we were on a voyage of discovery with many others; some we met at the hardware counter; some live thousands of miles away. From our voyages we, and many others, brought things back to the store and our neighborhood. We were enriched by what people gave back to geographical community from the communities of interest they had discovered and took part in online.

shopping or health advice, plays only a small part. If that is all I did online I would rarely go there.

When encouraging and showing people how to get and stay online, it's important to enable them to make this new medium their own. Some of the most successful students are those who do not only want to know more but also go away thinking they discovered this all by themselves. Because the Internet and learning are about interactivity. And showing that you have learned the necessary skills is being able to do the work for yourself, including continuing to learn. Properly teaching someone to use the Internet is opening a door to her. It enables someone to go into a new set of places and do things for themselves.

Learning is rarely sufficient through a one-day hands-on experience. It needs several sessions with time in between for digesting the

overcoming the fact that, however good the manual, it seems to rarely list your needs in the index. It's also another form of support for learning, places to ask seemingly simple questions without appearing foolish. Mentors can be people at a great distance—and on the Internet you're likely to find someone who shares your interests.

Getting online requires thinking and change. It's a huge educational project we approach in our own individual ways. For it to be successful requires serious thought about what we want us all to gain. Do we want everyone to have a more complicated form of television or a new way to contribute to society? One is a set of skills, the other is a way of thinking and acting.

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