

Chapter 57

Bridging the Age– Based Digital Divide

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ABSTRACT

An increasing reliance on digital technology in one's everyday life necessitates the development of digital literacy skills to enable one's continued participation in the Internet information-age. As existing services, such as banking and shopping, move increasingly online, the likelihood of excluding certain demographic groups, such as the elderly and those living in rural areas, increases exponentially. The following article outlines the results of a pilot study that explored the perceived digital literacy skills of a group of adults in a rural community. It will be shown that despite relatively low confidence levels reported by the participants, they were nevertheless keen to learn how to use digital technologies. Based on participant feedback, the study concludes that there is a need to develop pedagogical strategies to teach digital literacy skills to older adults, particularly those living in rural and remote areas.

INTRODUCTION

IT has been labelled as the indispensable grammar of modern life for all adults (Willis, 1999), giving rise to ongoing political efforts to ensure that every citizen has access to Information Communication Technologies (ICTs) and to reduce disparities between those segments of society that have access to ICT and those that do not (Selwyn, 2004). There are three broad trends currently affecting societies around the world: the ageing of our populations, the continued urbanisation of human societies and the increasing reliance on ICTs. Demographic changes leading to the ageing of our populations are occurring alongside rapid technological change (Australian Government Department of Health and Ageing, 2012). According to the Australian Government (2007), more than 36% of people aged 65 years or older live in rural and remote communities where social isolation and lack of access to services is more likely to be a problem than it is for urban dwellers who take such amenities for granted. Add to this the growing

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-5225-3417-4.ch057

evidence (Czaja & Schulz, 2006) that older people are less digitally literate, and therefore unable to access on-line services, quite clearly we have a problem in need of a solution.

As the accessibility of broadband increases in rural and remote areas of Australia, older people in these communities will potentially have increased opportunities to integrate digital technology into their daily lives and reap a range of benefits. As part of a government funded initiative, digital hubs were developed in various rural locations in Australia to enable local residents to increase their online engagement and better understand the opportunities created by the National Broadband Network (NBN). This article reports on one such effort to develop the digital literacy skills of residents living in Oakey—one of the first rural communities in Australia to benefit from the NBN. A local library was established as a digital hub that provided a series of freely available digital training programs to community members. This paper reports on the perceived digital literacy skills of 20 adults who participated in these programs. It will be shown that, despite rating their confidence with digital technologies as relatively low, the participants welcomed the opportunity to learn and develop their digital literacy skills. This paper thus concludes with a recommendation for the development of similar training programs, particularly in rural areas where prior exposure to digital technology may be limited.

AN AGE-RELATED DIGITAL DIVIDE

There has been much said in the press and academia about the so-called ‘digital divide’; the divide between those who *have* access to technology, computers and the Internet and those who do not. A digital divide exists between industrialised and developing nations but there is also a dichotomy within individual societies, with older demographics invariably being disadvantaged by the digital divide (Jimmoyiannis & Gravani, 2010). The situation is likely to worsen as the proportion of elderly in a society becomes larger. It is estimated that by 2020, 20% of the population in the US will be 65 years and over while 24% of people in Hong Kong will be over 65 by 2025 (Bartlett & Phillips, 1995). Social commentators have been quick to point out that the information society is also an ageing society (Bernard & Phillips, 2000). According to Selwyn, Gonrad, Furlong and Madden (2003, p. 562), the ageing of technology users has led to the “discursive portrayal of ‘silver surfers’, a popular but nebulous description of the burgeoning group of confident and competent older ICT users.” Given that computer and Internet usage are negatively correlated with age, the utopian vision of ‘silver surfers’ may be an over-statement.

Research shows that, although older adults are the fastest growing demographic group in developed countries, the uptake of ICT by older adults lags behind other groups (Neves et al, 2013). It is becoming increasingly evident that, while it is true that some older people know how to use computers and the Internet, an age-based digital divide nonetheless exists. In 2005, only 26% of people aged 65 and over were Internet users, compared to 67% and 80% in the 50-64 and 30-49 year age groups respectively (Czaja & Schulz, 2006).

In discussing the use of digital technology by elders, it is therefore necessary to distinguish between the characteristics of current and future generations of online elders. As Willis (2006) observes, the next generation of elders (56% of those currently aged 50-64 years—the early baby boomers) have used computers and the Internet at work and will, reportedly, miss the Internet if it is not available to them. This suggests that occupation and the workplace are key determinants of Internet use. According to Willis (2006, p. 45) “Being in the workforce is a major factor in acquiring and maintaining computer skills and in having access to the Internet and a supportive environment in which to learn these skills.”

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