Chapter 19
Technology Use and Its Changing Role in Community Education

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ABSTRACT

Technology, particularly as it supports interactive learning communities, now plays a central role in community education. While technology affords access to information more efficiently than ever before, it also requires additional skills. For technology to play out its role effectively, community educators need to design instruction, curriculum, and programs that offer customizable learning and socially rich learning environments. Every effort needs to be made to make sure that learners have opportunities to access and learn with technology. Successful community efforts to incorporate technology tend to include these factors: local needs, local resources, local broad-based planning, partnerships among organizations, accessible and appropriate technologies, opportunities for community building and socializing, and locally meaningful content and outcomes. Two community education foci are examined in detail: women's empowerment and health literacy.

INTRODUCTION

As the sense of community has expanded to encompass both physical and virtual mutual spaces and agreed-upon identities, the need for community education has also increased. Communities need to access, evaluate, and use increasing amounts of information for individual and group sustenance and improvement. Technology has served as a catalyst for such information transformation and can also be used to educate communities. For example, government agencies increasingly include e-government initiatives that use information technology tools and systems to provide better public services that can transform relations with citizens and businesses. For technology to play its role in community, several factors need to be in place, which this chapter discusses: changes in access issues, technology tools, instructional design, and topical applications of community education.

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COMMUNITY EDUCATION DEFINITIONS

Most simply, community education is education within the community, for the community, by the community. Community education is usually associated with community-based non-formal adult education, which forms the basis of this chapter's discussion. However, the scope of community education can vary from providing all the educational needs of the community to providing strictly informal adult education for self-development. Sometimes community education has a governmental or political agenda, be it citizenship education, "liberation" connotation, or a sense of social issues-based community development. In other circles, community education reflects moral, social, or personal development. Issues of health, environment, economics, and career development can also fall under the umbrella of community education.

The Scottish Community Education defined community education as "a process designed to enrich the lives of individuals and groups by engaging with people living within a geographical area, or sharing a common interest, to develop voluntarily a range of learning, action and reflection opportunities, determined by their personal, social, economic and political needs" (Scottish Community Education Council, 1990, p. 2). United States adult educators defined community education as: "the process of identification of community needs and the marshalling of resources to meet those needs so that the community and all its members can grow through social and educational programs" (Fellenz & Coker, 1979, p. 319).

In the United States, community education may relate to public education, as defined by Minzey (1972):

Community Education is a philosophical concept which serves the entire community by providing for all of the educational needs of all its community members. It uses the local school to serve as the catalyst for bringing community resources to bear on community problems in an effort to develop a positive sense of community, improve community living and develop the community process toward the end of self-actualization. (p. 150)

A leader in the field, Wisconsin Department of Public Instruction (2008) listed five components of community education, which serve as their philosophical foundation: citizen involvement, needs assessment and planning, extended use of public education facilities, interagency coordination and cooperation, and leadership and accountability. They also supported Decker's 1992 community education principles:

- **Self-Determination**. An assessment should identify local needs and wants.
- **Self-Help**. People should be encouraged to assume more responsibility for their own well-being.
- **Leadership Development**. Community development should incorporate local citizen leadership.
- **Localization**. Education should be offered as close as possible to the intended community.
- **Integrated Delivery of Service**. Local organizations should collaborate, pooling their resources and meeting their own goals.
- **Maximum Use of Resources**. Local material and human resource should be integrated and maximized.
- **Inclusiveness**. Community education should involve all community constituents.
- **Responsiveness**. Public institutions should develop programs that are responsive to community needs.
- **Lifelong Learning**. All ages of residents in various community settings should have access to learning.

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