

Chapter 15

Learning, Old Age and Email

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ABSTRACT

This chapter describes a small research project to place Internet-linked computers in a retirement complex in Melbourne, Australia (Murnane 2007, 2008). The aim was to research the existing computer skills of the residents, provide lessons in the use of email and general Internet and computer use, investigate the most appropriate type of lessons, document the problems encountered by very senior people encountering computing and the Internet for the first time, collect research on how they used the computers, the attitudes of financial management, nursing and occupational staff towards the activity, and the involvement of peers, family and friends.

LEARNING, OLD AGE AND EMAIL

The Internet is widely regarded as a young person's playground, but it can be even more important for the aged, supplying several elements scarce or completely missing from their lives. The onset of age-related problems can be delayed by activity and mental stimulation. The Web, and particularly email, can provide by far the best link to family, friends and the World. The Web is a powerful and interesting source of activity which can be indulged in without the need for organised group activity,

and it could support public engagement with science. Experience with a small research project at the Old Colonists' Association of Victoria shows over 80's in supported Hostel accommodation with no experience of computers can learn to use email and the Web independently. However, even the latest products of user-friendly technology do not negate the mental problems associated with aging and attention must be paid to appropriate social and technological environments, and particularly to teaching methodology.

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INTRODUCTION

There is an increasing volume of material in the literature involving the use of computers and the Internet concerned with clinical aspects, diagnostics and monitoring of the aged (Nugent 2007), but comparatively little on those in this age group learning to use computers themselves. Shapira, Barak and Gal (2007) report on factors relating to the psychological impact of learning to use the Internet, as does White, McConnell, Clipp, Branch, Sloane, Pieper and Box (2002), but these and other researchers say little about the actual learning process itself, its effect on individuals, and virtually nothing on its social context. The research described here, although limited, suggests that difficulties people over 80 have in learning to use computers have been considerably glossed over. Although the published findings are quite strong, the papers provide few details on the actual teaching methodology or the practice employed, and provide little or no guidance to anyone starting an Internet program in a low-care retirement complex. With the exception of Fokkema and Knipscheer (2007), who provide no detail other than that instruction was given at home by volunteers, most studies (Seals, Clanton, Agarwal, Doswell & Thomas 2008; Tse, Choi & Leung 2008; White, *et al.* 2002) are confined to groups taught in semi-formal classes, whereas our experience shows the need for older seniors is for individual lessons and one-to-one help, with extensive support from family and peers.

Beginners over the age of 80 face several problems in learning to use computers. The most significant of these is an age-related deterioration in mental condition. This affects everyone over 80, though very unequally, and causes problems in understanding a modern graphical interface and in remembering the set of manipulations required to read and send email. Poor hand-control causes trouble with both keyboard and mouse, and there is a noticeable feeling among them that computers

are a young person's domain, a perception that can sap confidence.

On the other hand, these retirees have three significant factors on their side. The first is their burning need for a fast, versatile connection to family and friends that does not require them to physically travel, and which is not dependent on anyone but themselves. The second is a community spirit of collective help and support. The last is ample time to experiment.

In future years most people entering a retirement home in Australia can be expected to be familiar with computer and Internet technology, but there is clearly a five to ten year gap, perhaps more, in which residents will have to be taught, and retirement home Management (those responsible for budget and the diversional staff responsible for activities) will need to be convinced of the need to provide Internet access. Given the reported benefits the Internet has for the aged, it is not good enough to leave the problem to solve itself: people now in retirement deserve to experience them. The problem is not in establishing these, but in teaching people not acquainted with computers to send and receive email. It is not the advantages of Internet access that now require research, it is the practicality and the practice. Hence this project concentrated on individual residents as they learned to use computers. As such it is also useful in terms of exploring the nature of technical literacy we often overlook.

BACKGROUND

Why weren't we offered this ten years ago?

*Comment from a resident at our first meeting.
(Field Notes)*

Despite the fashion in some quarters to disparage the ability of anyone not born into 'the computer age' to take up, or even see the utility of the computer and its inherent communication possibilities,

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