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STUDY

Game on? Or game over?

Recognizing the instrumental values of computer “play”

Public access venues often prioritize “productive” ICT use over “play” or “entertaining” ICT use (gaming, social networking, music) by restricting the types of activities that are allowed on public access computers. However, the distinction between “productivity” and “play” is complicated. Venues should recognize that users gain important, transferable technology skills through play. Venues should also recognize the value inherent in play.

Background

When public access venues privilege so-called “productive” activities over “play,” they reflect expectations about “good” and “bad” ICT use. Productive use (e.g. resume writing, job hunting, research) is frequently characterized as instrumental use because it leads to positive impact. Play (e.g. gaming, social networking) is characterized as non-instrumental use because users consider it valuable in and of itself. Due to the popularity of play in public access venues, these value-laden policy choices merit closer scrutiny.

This brief summarizes the report, *The Value of Non-Instrumental Computer Use*, by Beth Kolko, Robert Racadio, Kate Deibel, Kristina Krause, and James Premph, which provides empirical evidence on the utility of “playful” computer activities. The

team conducted research in privately-owned LAN houses in Brazil. LAN houses are important access sites for the Brazil’s lower-income communities.

The study is one of seven in-depth inquiries of the Global Impact Study of Public Access to Information & Communication Technologies and recommends venues support non-instrumental activity as one pathway to gaining digital literacy skills.

Research design

The study sought to answer these & other questions:

- How do users value non-instrumental computer use?
- What computer skills are gained through non-instrumental use?
- Are these skills transferrable to more “productive” tasks?

- How do user characteristics affect ICT skill level and use?

Researchers addressed the above questions by:

- Conducting qualitative, semi-structured interviews including ethnographic field visits, with 45 public access venue patrons, and
- Administering quantitative computer-based exercises (CBEs) to 303 respondents from 17 public access venues.

Findings

Fun, community, and connectedness drive ICT use.

Nearly 60% of respondents report that family members introduced them to the computer. This relationship with technology began with gaming for more than 20% of respondents; for another 35%, it began with social networking

and email. Regardless of age or level of exposure, social reasons motivate respondents to continue using ICTs—for staying in touch with family and friends or meeting new people. Users also state that they visit LAN houses as much for the social interaction as the technology. Despite having internet access at home, some respondents still visit public access venues for social reasons. Some choose the LAN houses because the internet is faster.

Formal ICT training does not meet users' needs. Brazilians have not embraced formal ICT training to gain computer knowledge and skills. Of those that have received formal training, nearly 50% found the course content boring or too simple. Users rather seek out one-on-one help or more tailored instruction that more appropriately meets their needs.

Labels of “productive” use and “play” fail to grasp the complexity of user attitudes. While public access venues often base policies on the difference between “productive” use and “play,” users themselves do not apply these labels. Their ranking of ICT activities on an index indicated that to users, tasks have different degrees of instrumentality. Users engage in a mix of instrumental and non-instrumental tasks and call on a variety of ICT applications or skills to accomplish both work tasks and play.

Skills developed during “play” transfer into “productive” use. People who use ICTs for play are generally as technologically capable as those who use them for “productive” purposes. The most important predictors of skill development are the variety and amount of activities a user engages in, not the type (productive versus play) nor the training they received (classes or coaching).

Recommendations

Venues should support both play and productive use.

The line between productivity and play is blurry. Public access venues that reflexively restrict “play” are shortsighted. Playful use is valued by users on its own merits. Playful use also makes users more skilled computer users generally, as facility that is developed in one application can be applied to other purposes. Use rules should be crafted to recognize multiple paths to digital literacy and the values inherent in these policies.

Appreciate and encourage face-to-face social interaction at public access venues.

Venues should design spaces to facilitate social use and collaboration. Social purpose is one of the primary motivations for people to use computers and to visit a public access venue. Unfortunately, venues are often structured for solitary use, with collaborative uses of space banned. Opportunities for social interaction and computing should be explored.

Create opportunities for one-on-one help and informal learning.

Brazilians largely eschewed formal training as too basic, boring, and unhelpful. Self-assessment may offer a way forward. The CBEs showed that users who rated themselves as highly skilled were, in fact, highly skilled. One-on-one assistance based on the user's skill level and one-off informal coaching sessions may be more appropriate and helpful than rigid classroom curriculum.

The **Global Impact Study** of Public Access to Information & Communication Technologies was a five-year project (2007-2012) to generate evidence about the scale, character, and impacts of public access to information and communication technologies. Looking at libraries, telecenters, and cybercafes, the study investigates impact in a number of areas, including communication & leisure, culture & language, education, employment & income, governance, and health. The research was supported by Canada's International Development Research Centre (IDRC) and the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation. Learn more at <http://tascha.uw.edu/projects/global-impact-study/>



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Source

Kolko, B., Racadio, R., Deibel, K., Krause, K., & Saville, K. (2013). *The Value of Non-Instrumental Computer Use: Skills Acquisition, Self-Confidence, and Community-Based Technology Training*. Global Impact Study Research Report Series. Seattle: Technology & Social Change Group, University of Washington Information School.

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