Training Methodologies

The Role of the Internet in Youth Work

Internet can be a great help for project work. If you know which services to use and how to use them. Referring to a youth project that he has organised himself, Enzo Kultus describes an example of a training session for a group of young people on the use of Internet as a tool for developing youth projects.

The Internet: everyone talks about it nowadays - even people who have no real idea what it is and how it works, let alone how it is evolving. Internet has become the buzz-word in international youth work. This is chiefly because it seems limitless - in its impact, features and potential. But, in reality, what is the "Internet"?

When you hear people talking about the Internet, you get a bit of everything: truths and rumours, ideas and experiences, breathless enthusiasm, and dire warnings about viruses and hackers. But the main focus is always the world-wide-web (or web, for short) and communication by e-mail. The sceptics get some surprises, but they still go home and try out the things they have heard. The fascination is contagious. And this also holds good when you talk to young people about the Internet, no matter where they come from, or what language they speak.

What gives the Internet its interest?

Everyone talks about the Internet, but they talk in general terms without taking any real interest in the services it offers and the things it can do. What gives the Internet its interest? Web-surfing is the main attraction. One click of the mouse takes you from one town, country or information source to another – fascinating, you have to admit. As multicoloured images spill across our screens, we are treated to an ongoing feast of music, colour and design. The sheer variety is dazzling – even if the quality varies as well. But what makes all of this so special?

First of all, the Internet is different because it cannot be consumed passively, like television or radio. You have to do something: decide where you want to start and keep going to the end (sometimes even further), or move on and find new paths. To get something from the web, you must have at least a few wishes and ideas of your own. For example, if I like classical music I can tune to a "classical" music station on the radio or watch a TV concert - but am stuck with the programme. If Mozart is being played, then I cannot get Satie. Things are different on the web: if I want to hear some Satie, I look for "Satie" sites, and get pictures, texts, scores and of course Satie's music pumped into my home. But I have to set priorities, track down the things I want and (this is where the web differs from radio and TV) download files before I can listen to them (the normal home computer's capacity limits real-time listening to extracts). The web demands initiative, enquiring minds and interaction. Of course, I'll find things I didn't expect and perhaps be lured off my track, but I can't be a mere consumer (quite apart from the fact that I need certain skills to use the web at all).

Secondly, the Internet is different because it is a multimedia instrument, and gives you pictures, sound and colour all at once. No matter where you are, a mouse-click is all it takes. No other medium works so well; even the CD-ROMs now massively available on every possible subject have their limits – they merely reproduce the data recorded on them, but the web is updated from one second to the next.

The main difference, though, is that everyone can join in and contribute. And the literary, musical and scientific "experts" aren't always the ones who know most. Real "fans", who are willing to pass on their knowledge, can often put them right.

by Enzo Kultus

Their enthusiasms are not merely cerebral, but deeply-felt sources of joy and disappointment – and they can make others feel them too.

Several questions need answering here: is this welter of services and data just too much? Can we trust this flood of information, images and reports? Does the web deal in knowledge or half-truths? There are no easy answers. In the real world, too, we are overwhelmed by the huge range of products on offer (e.g. at a Virgin Megastore). For a long time, we have all had to decide for ourselves whether the things we read in papers or books or see on TV are true. So far, we have always managed to do this - so why should things be any different with the web? In fact, cross-checking on the web is even easier. One click, and you get another opinion or viewpoint. And if that is not enough, you can ask the whole world by contacting a newsgroup.

This brings us to another aspect of the Internet - on-line communication with other inhabitants of the web's "global village". The Internet pioneers started out by exchanging instant messages over huge distances, and E-mail (or electronic mail) caught on long before the web itself existed. Its only rival for speed was the telephone. You typed a few lines, pressed the "send" button and your message arrived, a few minutes later, on the other side of the world. And the reply was just as fast.

E-mail is still the most popular Internet service. Countless people use it daily - even those who remain sceptical about the vast range of other services on offer. It not only offers really fast intercontinental communication, but costs immeasurably less than all the alternatives. It is user-friendly and informal. On the Internet, the same data (images, text, documents) can be sent simultaneously to numerous recipients.

What if you don't have anyone to e-mail? You simply get to know someone. IRC (InternetRelayChat) or "chat" opens the way to live communication with others, and one-to-one dialogue as well. You can find answers to any question you can think of by contacting a newsgroup (of which there are over 80,000 postings) and reading what others have to say or (better still) joining in the discussion yourself.

The Internet really is a big help with many projects: an example

It will be clear by now that, for me, the Internet's positive aspects outweigh the negative. Of course,

I have criticisms too, but the Internet really is a big help with many projects. For example, when we set out to build a solar car with young people from four countries, we started by collecting all the relevant information we could find in the four languages. Solar technology, materials, brakes, steering and safety were some of the things we looked into, and a few hours on the Internet gave us more information than three weeks' research in libraries and workshops. After that, we took all the unanswered questions to the newsgroups. In no time, we had all the data we needed to build a solar car (and were even offered technical back-up and equipment). In fact, making contacts, getting to know people, and picking up new communication and information techniques proved more important than collecting information and materials.

Sticking to this example, let us look more closely at what we did. Our work on the Internet was divided into five stages:
1. Basic familiarisation with the Internet;
2. Access to the necessary hardware;
3. Practical exercises on computers;
4. Collecting and storing information;
5. Communication.

Basic familiarisation

Everyone knows that young people are not strong on theory. And so we chose simply to explain what the Internet could do, leaving the participants to decide for themselves which services they needed. We focused solely on the web (ease of use, language choice, multimedia dimension and anonymity of surfing), e-mail (fast, direct communication in all languages) and newsgroups (wide range of topics and languages and answer to the problem of having no e-mail correspondents). For us, theory also meant filling in the historical background, telling people about the various services and explaining how to use them. At the same time, we introduced the various types of hardware and software, and explained how to use them.

Hardware and software

No particular type of hardware is needed to access the Internet. We ourselves had just a few old 486 computers with Windows 95 – although they did have a 32MB memory and a fast graphic card. For the Internet, we used an ISDN card and an old computer equipped with LINUX, which meant that all the computers could access the web simultaneously. (Since LINUX comes free and includes software for the ISDN card and router, this internal network cost

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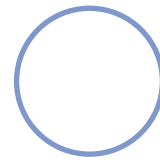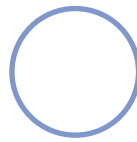
relatively little. All we needed to be up and running was a few network cards, a hub and the network itself. Want to know how it works? Just look it up on the Internet. That is what we did for our project and that was how we set up the LINUX router).

We used the software provided with Windows - Internet Explorer for the web and Outlook Express for e-mail and newsgroups.

Practical exercises

For our purposes, this meant using and configuring the software. Internet Explorer needs next to no adapting. We explained and practised using "favourites" (for the web), saving pages and pictures, and downloading files. We created e-mail addresses for all the participants, so that they could use the Outlook Express e-mail function. We practised sending and answering mails on Internet, and attaching documents and images. We also configured access to a news-server and subscribed to the relevant newsgroups. The news was read and recovered daily from the server.

Collecting and storing information

This, with communication, was the main focus of our work. We saved web pages using Internet Explorer and authorised access to the server. We marked important e-mails and items of information for copying into a text document, which we mailed to all the project participants. This allowed everyone to keep abreast of the information we had gathered.

Communication

This is the most interesting part of working with the Internet. Our first question – who were we to communicate with? - more or less answered itself. Every web page we looked at carried an e-mail address, and so we simply mailed them. Getting no reply was really unusual. The participants were amazed: total strangers not only answered our e-mails, but even sent us pictures, documents and other Internet addresses to help us with our project. We found the same with the discussion groups, though the answers were a bit slower in coming. (These delays are inherent in the "bulletin board" system, as the server takes a few days to put all the postings on the boards).

Thanks to the information and assistance we got from our new Internet "pals", we quickly had all the basic data we needed to build our solar car. And, because some of our contacts were particularly kind and offered us equipment and materials as well, we were soon able to start work.

What does this example show us?

This example shows two things: i) a very basic computer set-up is enough to get you on the Internet; ii) it is best to stick to two services - web and e-mail – to start with.

To plan training in group use of the Internet, you do not necessarily have to be a real computer expert. The emphasis should be on the basics of the Internet and on using software: this makes web-surfing child's play.

The following is a check-list for training on using the web with a browser:

1. Computer: 486 minimum, 32 MB RAM, Windows 95 or a more recent version, a modem or an ISDN card, and a phone line;
2. Internet access (a dial-up provider should suffice);
3. Programmes: Internet Explorer 5.0 or a later version (Netscape is better with a Mac);
4. For training with browser: correct keying-in of Internet addresses (URLs) (no spaces, lower-case, etc.). It is best to concentrate on the BACK, FORWARD, STOP and REFRESH buttons to start with.
5. Explain links and remember - the left-hand button on the mouse is enough for surfing.
6. For more advanced participants: using search engines; using the right-hand button on the mouse (e.g. to open an item in another window); setting up favourites; saving web pages on the hard disk for off-line reading.

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Check-list for e-mail training

1. Beginners

   Using e-mail addresses on the web (GMX, WEB.de, Hotmail, Yahoo). Advantage: can be used easily with a web-browser, which is already familiar. Drawback: often incompatible with e-mail software. Using e-mail addresses with specific software (e.g. Outlook Express or Netscape equivalent): writing, sending, reading and replying to e-mails.

2. Advanced:

   Configuring an e-mail account, sending documents and/or pictures, sending e-mails to several recipients, using mailing lists.

Training lasts three days:

Day 1: Introduction to the Internet, Internet access, using a browser, surfing;

Day 2: Search engines, setting up favourites, saving pages;

Day 3: Writing, sending, reading and replying to e-mails.

Ideally, a simple project should be planned for day 4, giving participants a chance to use the things they have learned (e.g. using servers to retrieve information for geography exercises and classroom presentations). Once they feel at home with the Internet, they can contact other groups and exchange e-mail addresses, details of interesting Internet sites, etc.

There is one golden rule, however: at least one person should be a real expert on the use of access and Internet software. That person should know enough sites (and their URLs) to help others access them, and should know how to use search engines (we are there to guide participants). It goes without saying that the hardware and software needed for Internet access should be freely available. Finally, separate computers for all the participants are not necessary – two sharing works perfectly.
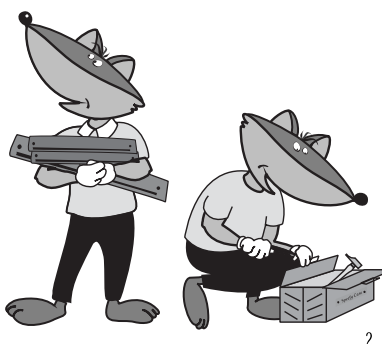
If all of this sounds interesting and you work in a Franco-German context, you are cordially invited to contact the Franco-German Youth Office for details of seminars on use of the Internet for intercultural education, the preparation and implementation of youth exchanges, and language seminars. Perhaps, some day, we shall work on a project together. I hope so.

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