

Introduction to "Technology in Everyday Life: Five Case Studies from Metropolitan Detroit"

Ruth Ray, Editor

In May, 2001, the *Washington Post* featured a week-long series of articles on technology in American life, which characterized the turn of the century as a time of pervasive and unavoidable change: "It is everywhere; rapid, relentless, demanding. From the womb to the casket, the global computer network is beginning to transform life at every stage" (<http://washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/washtech/techweek/A26572-2001May14.html>). This popular characterization is certainly true, although more true for some than others. It is important for educators to look to individuals, not just media accounts and scholarly research, for greater insight into the unique effects of technological change on people's lives and learning. As anthropologist John Szwed argues in "The Ethnography of Literacy," to understand literacies of all kinds, including the development of computer literacies, we must examine their everyday meanings: "that is, the roles these abilities play in social life; the varieties of reading and writing available for choice; the contexts for their performance; and the manner in which they are interpreted and tested, not by experts, but by ordinary people in ordinary activities" (422). We offer the five case studies in this issue, representing various types of computer learners in the Detroit metropolitan area, as a gesture in that direction, hoping to inspire readers to conduct their own research on the ways technology is being taken up (or not) and uniquely adapted by the people around them.

The case studies presented here are revised versions written by graduate students at Wayne State University as part of a semester-long seminar on Literacy and Technology (see our course website at <http://www.geocities.com/eng7020/>). In addition to reading a range of scholarly literature and discussing it face-to-face and online, students were required to create, collaboratively, an annotated bibliography of resources on literacy and technology (available on the [website](#)); to develop a syllabus for a college writing course that was theoretically informed by the seminar readings; and to write a case study based on interviews with and observations of one person as he/she interacted with computer technology.

As a methodology, we consider case study research to be both theoretically and practically useful. Theoretically, our research illustrates, in concrete detail and with human interest, the great diversity of experience in regards to learning and using technology. Case studies also confirm the importance of contextual and ideological views of literacy and reveal the paucity of skills-based, technical definitions. Sociolinguist Brian Street makes this distinction most clearly in arguing that

literacy can no longer be addressed as a neutral technology, as in the reductionist 'autonomous' model, but is already a social and ideological practice involving fundamental aspects of epistemology, power, and politics: the acquisition of literacy involves challenges to common discourses. . . , shifts in what constitutes the agenda of proper literacy. . . and struggles for power and position In this sense, then, literacy practices are saturated with ideology. (435)

Merrifield et al. extend the work of Street and others to demonstrate, in their case studies of technology learners in San Francisco and the Appalachian area of Tennessee, that "individuals vary in how, where, and when they use [computer] literacy as well as what they use it for. Different demands and uses of literacy may exist for the same person in different domains of their lives -- work, family, church, social group -- and at different stages in their life history" (98). Further, Merrifield et al. found, as we did in our profiles of metro Detroiters, that people "will learn to use -- and will search out and pay hard-earned money for -- technologies that they believe can do something useful or important for them. But they will not necessarily use technologies -- even if readily available to them -- when they perceive no particular benefit in doing so" (171). The "benefits" of greatest value to their case study participants, as well as ours, include social and economic advancement and a feeling of personal empowerment.

What such "advancement" means to individuals is highly unique. It may mean a better job or better pay, as is the case for many of the participants in the Merrifield et al. study; or the satisfaction of doing the job you already have more efficiently and effectively, as in the case studies by Jamie Babcock and Anne Williamson; or building closer, more intimate relationships, as in the case study of the father and son by Stephanie Hall-Sturgis. One of our case

study participants has come to see technology as an important means of identity construction for himself and his students. Professor Brooks's notion of "computer literacy," as Colleen Klaus illustrates, includes the critical, self-questioning stance that Freire and other radical educators -- Ira Shor and bell hooks, for example -- consider necessary to all personal empowerment and social transformation.

Practically, our own and others' case study research provides useful insights for teaching. As a result of their observational and interview research, Merrifield et al. offer a number of recommendations that will ring true to educators, especially those who work with adult learners: they suggest that developers of technology-based educational programming "pay careful attention to the ways that technology is used in people's everyday lives, to its cultural as well as pragmatic functions, and to the formats that make its use appealing" (210). They argue that educators working with non-traditional students must become knowledgeable about their students' family, work and social lives in order to develop courses that are relevant and that draw on students' already established learning strategies, as well as their motivations for learning. The main strategy they observed -- learning to use technology through a supportive network of friends, family and associates -- is apparent in our Detroit case studies, as well, and strongly suggests the need for collaborative learning in and around technology-based classrooms, along with greater sensitivity to community needs and values in developing curricula.

For those readers looking for unifying themes in our Detroit case studies, we have identified two prominent ones: there are generational differences in the ways computers are taken up and used by learners, and learners inevitably change in their attitudes and orientations toward computers over time. The first theme is made explicit in the case studies by Thomas Trimble and Stephanie Hall-Sturgis, where we are introduced to three generations of learners -- a young child, a mature adult, and an older retiree. These profiles clearly illustrate how the generations are negotiating their differences and learning from each other. The second theme is apparent in the case studies by Colleen Klaus, Anne Williamson and Jamie Babcock, where participants reflect on the changes in their uses and attitudes toward computers over time and consider what their technological future may hold. These two themes, taken together, suggest that educators attempting to prepare diverse students for life in an era of "rapid, relentless" technological change face significant challenges. Among them are how to teach students to value and learn from their multiple differences, technologically, as well as socially; how to develop in students an unshakeable sense of their own purpose and agency in the midst of massive social change; and how to inspire an attitude of life-long learning and re-learning in regards to technology and every aspect of life that is affected by technology.

References

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