Role challenges in technology and social action projects:
bridging the gap between social software and social contexts

Nick Plant, University of the West of England (nick.plant@uwe.ac.uk)

Background and overview

Social software is now everywhere and there is understandably much excitement about its contribution to community and social action movements. But web 2.0 tools and other new technologies need aligning with social context, just like older technologies. This represents a particular challenge to grass roots community groups and small non-profits. In such settings there is often a gap between technology and social objectives involving role conflicts, and a need for a negotiated balance of power between techno-evangelists and social activists. High expectations surrounding technical opportunities sometimes overwhelm social purposes in the rush to keep up with trends.

This workshop provides an opportunity to explore the gap between technical endeavours and their social contexts in this new era, and to contribute to the search for contextual alignment in the appropriation of new technologies for social action. A model that helps identify and bridge this gap, hence build sustainability, will be explored experientially. Its origin –action research in the UK community sector– will enable a UK/US comparative element to emerge. Qualitative case study evidence on the necessary bridge-building activities will be offered and enhanced through participative workshop contributions.

Objectives

The objectives of this workshop are to:-
- establish and illustrate the case for bridge-building activities in aligning new technological tools with their social action contexts;
- offer a model for understanding and integrating the separate roles of technology experts and social activists in bridging the technology-context gap;
- illustrate briefly the use of the gap-bridging model with examples from UK action research in technology and social action;
- generate further examples of the use of the model in practice by exploring and applying participants' own examples (comparing and contrasting UK and US experiences, if time permits);
- critique and develop the model and identify implications for future research and practice development.

Expected outcomes

By the end of this workshop, the expectation is that:-
- the alignment model will be available to participants as a sense-making device to support their own practice or contribute to research;

- a method for applying the model in specific projects and case study situations will have been piloted for possible replication by participants;

- technical experts and social activists may be better able to appreciate, delineate and negotiate their respective roles in technology and social action settings;

- the alignment model will have been subjected to further trial (employing UK/US comparisons if time permits);

- unexpected and emergent outcomes will also be welcome, and will be celebrated, by keeping structure and process control minimal and by facilitating maximal participation.

Intended audience

The workshop should be relevant to a range of conference delegates including academics interested in technology and social action, and non-profit sector practitioners. Its action research orientation and participative style should enable knowledge generation and contributions to practice to emerge in equal or any measure.

It is hoped in particular that participants will be a mix of technical experts and social activists interested in exploring with others the challenges to their major roles they may be facing or interested in. The aim is to find common ground and explore together a combined approach towards sustainability in technology and social action settings using the proposed alignment model.

Practitioners or academics involved in, or aspiring to, hybrid social-technical roles will find this workshop particularly relevant, though in common with other participants should expect to be challenged as well as empowered through taking part.

Proposed agenda and workshop process

It is proposed that the workshop organisation will be as follows:-

1. **Preparation**: workshop orientation via a simple handout made available beforehand, complete with an optional preparatory exercise (subject to conference organisation and timing);

2. **Introduction, expectations and roles people play**: a participative scene-setting exercise on techno-evangelists, social activists and others;

3. **Gaps, role conflicts and bridge-building:** a brief introduction to the key issues;

4. **Aligning technology and social contexts:** an overview of a model with examples;

5. **Gap-bridging in practice:** a small group exercise to apply the model to participants' own projects/experiences;

6. **Comparing and evaluating results:** small group report-backs and discussion – (how) does the model stand up to test?

7. **Action-planning and follow-up:** small group exercise to draw conclusions, summarise contributions to knowledge or practice and identify post-workshop actions/implications/opportunities.

Participants may wish to continue exchanging and evaluating case study experiences afterwards, and peer review of ongoing research may be relevant following the workshop. Follow-up options already considered include a write-up of findings and use of the conference or facilitator's web site for (possibly blog-based) recording and progression of workshop outcomes.

These and/or other actions relevant and interesting to participants will be negotiated at the end of –or after– the workshop, the intention being to provide a post-project resource and developmental opportunities as appropriate.