Mutual Help Medical Websites (54)

People suffering from chronic medical conditions need information and the support of others who share their problems. How can such groups use the Internet?

A web community can be a powerful source of collective intelligence, of comfort, wisdom, friendships and material assistance. Unfortunately the medium can be open to abuse.

The solution is to build trust in stages. First, it should be explained to new visitors by why the community was built and who should use it. Second, it should allow users to choose when and how to give out personal information. Third, the organizers must plan how to deal with the problems of lurkers or abusive material. And, finally, the organizers and the community itself should work together to build "thick trust" by supporting joint activities.

Written by Patricia Radin and Andrew Dearden

Service Learning (90)

The people who are the most affected by the digital divide typically need to access information from nonprofit organizations. However, most NPO’s do not have the time, personnel, or skills to create and maintain web sites. Thus, the service-oriented information needed by lower-income community members is often not online. What is needed is a pool of skilled, but cost-free, assistance. One place to find this pool is on college campuses with service-learning programs. Service-learning is a pedagogy that connects traditional learning in the classroom to practical projects in and with the community. Students could create and/or update web sites for local NPO’s, train agency representatives to maintain their own sites, and/or train community members to access and evaluate online information.

Written by Norman Clark

Participatory Budgeting (71)

Budget development is often thought of as a dry, technical task, best left to "experts." But budgets are critical tools through which social values are expressed. Developing a budget, with its criteria and categories, is in fact a "political" act, with winners and losers who rarely participate in the process.

This pattern provides examples of successful "participatory budgeting" (with Porto Alegre, Brazil the best known) and argues for the development of online tools (coupled with face-to-face meetings) to enable widespread participation in the budgeting process. Timely, meaningful participation at every stage – from open consideration of assumptions and allocations to dissemination of the results of the process – is encouraged in this pattern.

Written by Andy Gordon and Chris Halaska

Appropriating Technology (108)

We usually think of technology as designed by elite groups — mostly male, mostly white, mostly upper class. But the lay public can also be producers of technology and science. Latino "street mechanics" created the Low Rider car which revolutionized their culture. Black teenagers created the "scratch" sound of rap by appropriating the turntable. Appropriated technology can help the disenfranchised gain social power.

A variety of barriers exist. Marginalized groups, for example, often cite "technocracy" as the evil which perpetuates disparity, which alienates them from technology. Few community resources exist for lay production. Corporations can increase profits by forcing consumers to exclusively use their products, thus creating an incentive to make products less appropriate.

What can be done? We can encourage marginalized groups to strive towards positive conceptions of hybridity rather than relying on notions of purity. Encourage the creation of community technology centers, and train engineers and designers to think about appropriation by users as a positive goal.

Written by Ron Eglash