



OLD DOGS LEARN NEW (E-) TRICKS

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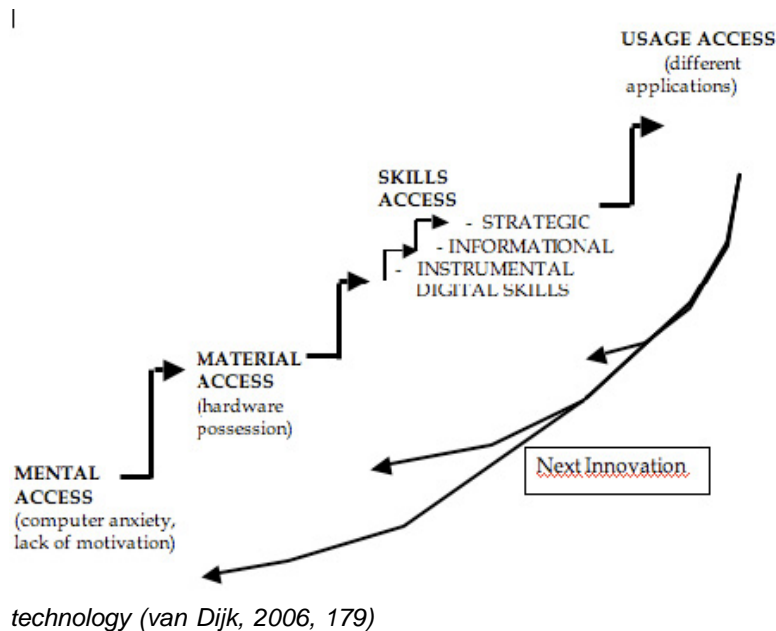
How do you share reflections on Communication for Development with scholars and practitioners alike -and in real time? How do you facilitate an interactive environment where participants have a voice and at the same time document the event for future reference? And how do you do this across continents? On the 13 and 14th of March 2009, we participated as guest lecturers in a seminar that took place on cyberspace, using a video link to connect the University of Malmö in Sweden and the University of Guelph in Canada. As old dogs, we learned some new (e-)tricks. We explain here how it all went beyond our expectations.

ACCESSING NEW TECHNOLOGY

For Jan van Dijk (2006), access has different connotations. First, there is the question of having an initial willingness to try out a technology. He refers to this as mental access ["do I want to bother with a Blackberry?"]. Once you overcome this, the next step involves material access, and this includes affordability ["can I get one here, is there a provider, what does it cost?"]. If you manage to conquer that, you come up with the question of instrumental access, or how to learn to use the new tools ["can someone help me figure out all these menus?"]. Last comes usage access; this is the point when you find value in the tool or service ["OK, this thing works, I just saved some money."] Van Dijk illustrates this in a diagram that signals how this process is recurrent for each new innovation (Figure 1).

*Figure
1: Four
stages
of
access
to digital*

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COLLABORATING AT A DISTANCE

We have just completed writing a book. Our collaboration was almost entirely dependent on Skype. One of us lives in Guelph and the other one in Ottawa. That may not be too far as the crow flies, but far enough in Canada (650 km), and farther still when you consider long-distance phone costs imposed by our uncompetitive phone companies.

Every so often, during the process, we would venture further into the world of new technology. Forgive the third person in the description that follows. We have yet not figured out a better way to draw on anecdotes that involve us both when writing together.

There was a time when Wendy was in New Delhi and Ricardo was at home in Guelph, skypeing with her while listening to an interview on the CBC. The interview was with Howard Rheingold talking about the book he had written called "Smart Mobs." He was explaining how the new technology was revolutionizing collective action. Ricardo sent Wendy the link, and there she was listening to the same interview in her guesthouse in India. Wendy got so carried away by the marvels of that technology that she suggested they start a Wiki to collect thoughts and ideas. The Wiki was born soon after. A year and a bit later, it still sits- out of date except for that first rush of ideas.

We had tried out new tricks, but did not like the taste much. Perhaps the level of "skill access" was insufficient to attain a nirvana of "use access"- perhaps the tool just did not fit our need.

So we were not feeling terribly technologically savvy when Helen Hambly-Odame, from Guelph University, suggested Ricardo be a guest lecturer for one of their web casts with the University of Malmö in Sweden.

MOVING BEYOND SKYPE

The seminar was part of the graduate program in Communication for Development hosted at Malmö. Since the lecture was to revolve around a paper that summarized our forthcoming book (Quarry and Ramirez, 2008), we decided to give it together. We both wondered what the dynamics of this session would be like. One of us likes to teach through applied group exercises, and how to do this in a virtual space posed many questions. It was agreed that Ricardo would be 'live' on camera in Guelph, so to speak, while Wendy was to be patched in from Ottawa somehow – via Skype. Jan van Dyck might have said that our mental access stage was still rather incomplete. Used as we were to considering face to face teaching special, we had our doubts about the setup.

Mikael Rundberg, from Malmö University, came to Canada from Sweden to manage the technology (fabulous to have someone who can solve instrumental access for you so effortlessly). Back to third person, to give you a clear picture of what happened next:

Saturday morning, Wendy went on line at 7:30 a.m. and could see the students at Malmö sitting and discussing their work. An hour later, she was 'on line' and by this time, Ricardo was at the University of Guelph. Students from around the world could access the duo's power point on line and follow the presentation on their respective computer screens. Those in Malmö and in Guelph had it all at their fingertips. All of them could contribute via chat, including moderators at both universities. We commented that it felt like being in some "Star Trek" episode. Ricardo had experience at one such event orchestrated by [K-Net](#) (they use a variation of [Moodle](#))¹ but we had never lived it first hand with participants so widely spread out worldwide.

What amazed us both the most was the usefulness of reading the 'on-line' chats that carried on right through our presentation. Rather than distracting, we found that they actually enhanced the presentation. People could pose questions in real time rather than wait until the end. Participants would express their agreement or not with our ideas, and others would comment on them. Some would provide answers that we would have agreed with, while others added new dimensions. We found the chat stimulating. It came from avid students, many currently also working as practitioners. It was special to have a sense of community and

added value contributed in real time.

Moreover, both our presentation and the materials we shared have been archived in Malmö University's course webzone and made available to future students – something new and noteworthy.

In our presentation, we expressed hope that the new social media was creating an unprecedented communication space. Thanks to this joint initiative between Malmö and Guelph, we witnessed the true potential of the technology. Mind you, the organizational culture behind it deserves much credit. As Helen Hambly-Odame stated at the opening of the seminar, the service was available for graduate students worldwide at no cost. Now that is a platform to celebrate, one that was rich enough to accomplish 'usage access'.

Old dogs can actually learn new e-tricks.

For a video recording of Ricardo and Wendy's lecture, choose the quality below according to your Internet bandwidth.

Play: [\[lowQ dial up\]](#) | [\[midQ ADSL\]](#) [\[highQ ADSL/LAN\]](#)



Ricardo
and

Wendy communicate with ComDev students in Guelph, Malmö and worldwide. The monitor to the left shows the Malmö classroom via videoconference. The screen to the left shows a Live Lecture application and the chat for participants worldwide.

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