

**A Communicative Approach to Technology and Capacity Building for
Social Service Delivery on St. Kitts:
Social Protection, Information Technology and Rhetoric**

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This project explores capacity building in information and communication technology (ICT) among paraprofessional social workers in the Department of Social and Community Development in St. Kitts during a transition period as the department migrates from paper to electronic records. Based on work from prior research projects, we specifically undertook the exploration of the relationship between professional identity and professional communication as it occurs in the development of writing skills required to document client service and prepare effective reports for use in program design and evaluation. We learned that initially following instruction in the basic tenets of rhetoric (e.g., audience point of view and methods of effective argumentative support), paraprofessionals readily adopted these into their writing. We propose rhetoric, understood as the development and presentation of persuasive argument, as a link between local stakeholders and international donor groups, providing stakeholders with new tools for effecting change, especially as an essential complement to increased access to ICT.

Introduction

An important challenge to developing countries is effective communication with partners in government, NGOs and international organizations. Information and communication technologies (ICT) are the means of choice for linking small islands to external partners in education, trade and development aid [1]. As ICT is becoming widely used in development contexts (ICT4D), there is increasing awareness of the cultural factors that impact upon the success and usability of a software system [2]. However, these cultural factors are under-researched and poorly understood [3].

One factor affecting the “cultural portability” of software arises from the fact that information management systems (IMS) do not in the first instance communicate information, but rather data; it remains to the users to translate collected data into information, understood as meaningful messages. Culture not only determines what constitutes meaningful messages, but also conditions how those messages are circulated: by whom, to what audience, for what purpose and to what desired effect [4]. Conversely, while culture affects the function of ICT, information technology has a profound effect on culture by affecting the economies of information circulation. Software designers must maintain a clear appreciation of the relationship between technology and culture as they collaborate with partners in the development process [5]. It is also crucial for ICT end-users to be aware of this reciprocal relationship as well, as their adoption of technology shapes their culture and work practices.

This paper is one of two papers (see Pitula, Sinnig and Radhakrishnan, which appears in the same panel at the 2010 SALISES Conference) of a project reporting on the introduction of a database in St. Kitts' Department of Social and Community Development. This portion of the project explores the social factors that effect the development of the information management system, examining these factors as they impacted two capacity building workshops in report writing given in conjunction with the introduction of new system. Although initially conceived as complementary to instruction in the use of the database, the writing instruction component rapidly assumed a primary role in demonstrating to stakeholders the utility of objective data in meeting the expectations of an audience of government groups, donor organizations, and NGOs. By presenting writing and ICT use from a perspective of persuasion and rhetoric, participants made explicit the unspoken values that conditioned local social service delivery, as well as the conflicts arising from discrepancies between local and foreign service-related values. For end-users, rhetoric's explicit awareness of audience characteristics provides an opportunity for understanding "from within," opening the door to new solutions and practices in service delivery.

Background

St. Kitts, the project site, is one of ten English-speaking small island developing states (SIDS) in the Eastern Caribbean region. Like other SIDS in the region, St. Kitts is marked by failing mono-crop agriculture, high debt-to-income ratio, high unemployment, diseconomies of scale, isolation and a variety of environmental and social vulnerabilities. A remittance-economy society, St. Kitts suffers from migration and brain-drain, and consequently, a resident population with high local need for social services, especially since the closing of the government-run sugar industry [6].

The department has experienced several recent interventions and assessments designed to improve the effectiveness of social service delivery. One reason for the need to improve performance and results lies in poor record keeping and oversight. A serious problem in St. Kitts, these issues are also endemic among the region's SIDS, as noted by UNICEF:

Planning and implementation capacity for social assistance programs is weak and further weakened by the plethora of small programs. The capacity to monitor and evaluate safety net programs is also weak and weak information and monitoring systems, compound problems associated with creating an effective social safety net. Most program information is not computerized, and program administrators often have difficulty accessing basic program information, such as how many program beneficiaries there are, or beneficiaries' geographic and demographic composition. Evaluations of programs are hardly ever undertaken. The lack of monitoring and evaluation systems makes evidenced based program planning impossible. Accountability and control mechanisms are weak. Policy and procedures are not fully documented. [7, p. 1-2]

In response to the above-outlined problems, beginning in 2008, at the request of the Department of Social and Community Development, ICT4D researchers from Montreal's Concordia University's Computer Science Department began work on a culturally sensitive, socially appropriate, locally useful information management system

for departmental records. In beginning our collaboration, it was clear to all parties that technology was more than a tool that could be “helicoptered” into the department’s work practices. As expressed by Adam Banks, Jr., “more than merely owning or being close to some particular technology, people must actually use it, and develop the skills and approaches to using it that are relevant to their lives [8, p. 68].

Social Justice and Technology

Critics have pointed to many factors that, while often unnoticed, affect the ways communication technologies are used and function. The Internet certainly presents SIDS with a wonderful resource for information and a corrective for the isolation experienced. Further, ICT is an important tool in development, and electronic client records have become the standard of international social work practice due to their ability to reduce expense, delay and duplication of service. These new communication technologies must nevertheless be carefully and critically assessed for their effect upon community development and life.

Of particular relevance to this present project (given the North-South dialog it represents) is the assertion the Internet has ushered in an era of “post-identity” communication, in which race, gender, class, handicap and other visible social markers are erased. Critics note, however, that making social difference invisible does not make it disappear—far from being a place of equality, cyberspace is a place that “gives us many more people writing, but...gives us many more of the same people writing” [Kali Tal in 8, p. 1]. Far from being a place beyond colour, gender and class, it is a place where the default user is white, male and wealthy [9]. Communication technologies are never socially and politically neutral; decisions are made about what investments will be made in infrastructure, which groups will have access to the technology, and how it will be used. Interfaces shape the way we communicate, and how we perceive the way we view the world [10]. As tempting as it is for ICT4D scholars and practitioners to believe they can simply change the interface or functionality to make it consonant with the target culture, basic research into how cultures—especially disfavoured ones—use technology is lacking [8]

Internet and electronic communication technology both shape and are shaped by culture. This can be traced in the effect of technology upon democracy and public life. To site a recent example, an editorial in the Barbados Free Press reported that the government had only made available three copies of an environmental impact report for a proposed hotel complex. According to the editorial, citizens were forbidden from making photocopies or hand-written notes during the 20 minutes they were given to read the over 300-page document. The editorial decried this as “business as usual,” common tactics used by the government and developers suppress public debate. However, the nature of business has clearly changed. The editorial appeared in the online version of the Barbados Free Press, in a country with an Internet penetration rate of 66%. The webpage was open for reader comments, many of which shared practical information (e.g., the information that could be obtained by comparing maps from 1988 and 2003 Physical Development Plans) or strategic suggestions (e.g., asking a poster who identified him/herself as an environmental planner to bring copies of the report to the public hearing) [11].

While Internet technology can be used intentionally to enhance and extend community activity, it also shapes it in unintentional ways. In his study of African American churches, Niles reported that many churches have designed websites. Because sermons are important communicative and performative artifacts that organize church life, it is natural that they would be included in the website content. However, Niles notes, such sermons were traditionally not written as manuscripts. This is largely a function of their delivery, in which audience reaction, in traditional call-and-response interaction, is central to the development of the sermon structure [Niles, in 8]. With the introduction of the website, the sermon undergoes a radical transition from a dynamic, oral interaction to a static text (an example can be seen in sermons posted on the website of Warren Chapel, AME, in Dallas, TX, at <http://www.warrenname.com/Sermons.dsp>).

Banks [8] notes that while technology is not equally distributed across racial, economic, ethnic or other lines of social discrimination, it is a mistake to simply agitate for improved access to technology. Rather, he argues, technology and access to it must be used (indeed have been used historically by African Americans long before M.L. King's use of television) to transform the social conditions that form the backdrop against which technology is used and in which people live. Minorities must meet "the challenge of transforming our technologies as we gain access to them, and that we use those technologies toward the larger project of transforming the nation, of justice and equal participation for...all people" [8, p. 131]. Banks identifies and supports this effort as *transformative access*, by which non-dominant groups use technology as a means of changing the social conditions in which the technology is used.

The above examples and theories of transformative access are rooted in the experience of African America, rather than from the Caribbean. Nevertheless, there are sufficient parallels between the social struggles of African Americans in the U.S. and local social service delivery practitioners and advocates in the Caribbean to permit useful transfer of the relevant concepts. These parallels are manifest in hierarchical power structures, the status of local vs. dominant cultural knowledge, and the access to technology for community development. The Department of Social Work and Community Development in St. Kitts pursues its mission contending within local, regional and international hierarchies, advocating for its programs by addressing its concerns in the vocabulary of the dominant social group. As we will see below, the values and standards of international social work practice are "default" truths, largely unquestioned or assessed for their relevance to local conditions; any local practice that deviates from these standards is considered "unprofessional" and in need of remediation and correction. Finally, as apparent in the workshops we provided, local social workers seek to draw upon community moral values to inform social service delivery decisions; as they use technology to improve their ability to persuasively address their audience of administrators and donors, technology thus becomes a tool in service to social change.

Transformative Access and Capacity Building

As stated, our primary project was the design of a culturally appropriate, useful and sensitive information management system. Based on our understanding that access alone is not sufficient to transform social meaning, we were aware of the need to present capacity building training that would enable the paraprofessional social workers to advocate effectively for their clients and programs. We also extended Banks'

observations about the transformative effects of rhetoric and persuasion: not only does effective use of persuasion and technology shape one's audience. It also affects one's own thinking. As one engages with the needs, expectations and values of one's audience, these factors become less unfamiliar and strange. Banks' transformative access is thus reciprocal, creating change not only in the outer social world, but in the inner cognitive lives of the users.

These observations were made during our two workshops. The first was a 3-day workshop conducted in conjunction with the requirements engineering stage of the database systems design. Despite upper-administrators' enthusiasm for the project, the paraprofessional end-users were resistant toward the prospect of migrating to electronic client dossier management. My focus was not on the database development itself, but on the writing that would transform data into meaning, allowing the paraprofessional social workers to better advocate for their clients. The reports and recommendations as written were discouraging, and did not have many champions either among administrators or the paraprofessionals themselves. The recommendations consisted largely of ineffective persuasive appeals, e.g., "The diet of nursing home residents is inappropriate and needs to be improved."

Such an appeal to local values (i.e., the obligation to provide suitable diet to incapacitated elders) was appropriate within the cultural context of personal relationships on St. Kitts – to point out that a neighbour or elderly person was in need of care constitutes an implicit call for action. No more explicit detail is necessary. From the perspective of the audience, e.g., administrators interacting with international donor organizations, these recommendations did not meet their expectations for quantitative evidence or reasoned action plans supporting a call for particular action within a given scope.

Our rhetorical instruction called for an inductive introduction to the formal canons of proof—appeals to emotion and community values, to logical reasoning, or to objective statistics (*logos*, *ethos*, *pathos*). Paraprofessional participants in the group recognized logical reasoning and statistical evidence to be those modes of proof most acceptable to their audience. They were also able to identify the ethical, emotional and moral appeal of their original recommendations, as well as their lack of quantitative and logical reasoning.

Another task presented at the workshop was to identify and address the intended audience for the rhetorical message. In this case, the audience was comprised of local departmental supervisors or upper level managers, as well as an indirect audience of international organizations. In describing the audience for the reports, the paraprofessionals identified them as having an over-riding concern with the economic factors of a recommendation ("They just care about money"). Effective rhetorical strategy was designed that made the recommendations explicit and measurable (e.g., improving the diet by replacing white bread and sugar with fresh fruit), and supporting the need for the recommendation with quantitative and reasoned evidence, such as referencing excess health costs associated with poorly controlled type-2 diabetes, which, the paraprofessionals argued, could be exacerbated by the current high-carbohydrate diet. The paraprofessionals were spontaneously able to identify the planned database as a source of necessary quantitative evidence, e.g., the number and cost of hospitalizations among diabetic nursing home residents.

A second workshop was a four-day workshop that occurred six months later, and coincided with the testing of the prototype database. This time the paraprofessionals (perhaps due to their experience in the prior workshop establishing the database's utility in advocating for desired client projects) were eager to begin use of the database. They rapidly grasped its function and use, reducing the amount of time needed for training on the database, thus making additional time available for the writing workshop. In this workshop, the content of the original workshop was reinforced on the first day. This required paraprofessionals to look at the projects they originally articulated (e.g., "Improving the food of elderly nursing home residents") in the original workshop, and then expand the recommendation into a full proposal.

In the course of the workshop, participants were encouraged to adopt the point of view of their audience, in particular, donors. They generated a series of questions that the imagined the audience would have, such as: what existing need will this project fulfill; why will this proposed solution be better than existing solutions; how will the effectiveness of this project be evaluated?

The participants began their work by writing their program title, objectives and outlined steps on flip charts. After completion, they then began interrogating their draft proposal outlines, asking the questions they anticipated hearing from their audience. In response to these questions, they began adding additional detail to the outlines (e.g., after entertaining the question "how will your project address this problem differently than existing school programs?", participants penciled in "project will be after school program; will include parents of at-risk youth"). After the projects were refined, the groups began to circulate and critique other groups' proposals.

The questions that participants anticipated from their audience had an apparent psychological immediacy, i.e., the participants generated, asked and responded to them in a genuine, engaged way. The questions did not seem to be strange or contrived, and the participants seemed genuinely interested in the answers. This was despite the fact that the questions introduced levels of detail and lines of argument that were not part of local rhetoric or argumentative traditions. Indeed, in the following weeks, observers remarked that while interacting with a visiting group of social workers from Cuba, the participants began interrogating their project proposals using the same set of questions generated in the exercises. This suggests the reciprocal nature of *transformative access*: as participants gained access to the database and associated writing style, the concerns of their interlocutors no longer seemed as unfamiliar ("They only care about money" became reframed as "How do we show why we need money") and became viewed as a valid parameter of inquiry.

In the months following the second workshop, we have encountered disappointment when our initial positive results were not maintained. The database, although in its second prototype, is not yet complete, and is currently being developed on a pro bono basis without formal funding. Perhaps as a function of the delays associated with the database, the paraprofessional social workers have not maintained the improvements noted in their report writing following the two workshops. Several months after the conclusion of the last workshop, the department director suggested that the situation was "like nothing has been said and the training that we've had hasn't helped."

It is hoped that following the completion of the final version of the information management system, and the implementation of an additional workshop, the skills demonstrated by the participants will become better integrated in their work processes, and the transformations in their writing will be better established. We are seeking funding for these further projects.

Conclusion

An important complement to the work of professionalizing paraprofessionals' direct client care and institutional strengthening in social protection is the development of professional communication skills. Little is accomplished by giving disfavoured groups access to technology that is controlled by elites, especially elites with substantially differing cultural perspective, as in the case of the paraprofessionals vis-à-vis government administrators or international donor organizations. As noted by Adam Banks, proximity to technology does not give one access to useful or meaningful or culturally useful content. In relation to the African American experience, Banks identifies and supports *transformative access*, by which non-dominant groups use technology as a means of changing the social conditions in which the technology is used [8]. Technology is viewed as a tool in service to social change: technical communication becomes the means by which data become information and ideas, and through their circulation, social action is facilitated. Following Banks' depiction of the African American context as a model, we thus propose further writing workshops based on the paradigm of transformative access, facilitating paraprofessionals' exploration of rhetorical forms that will successfully advocate for their clients' interests with their intended audience.

The experience on St. Kitts was that of a small island and may be to some degree transferable to other SIDS. Wardel characterizes Caribbean islands as "plural social networks, extended beyond their island bases, which none the less often lack mutual interdependence in cultural and institutional terms" [12, p. 504]. Ways to link Eastern Caribbean SIDS toward solutions of common problems would be useful and welcome. Indeed, given the defining characteristics of SIDS and the wide variety of social, economic, environmental and cultural challenges they confront, the concept of "small islands" may be usefully extended beyond its geographical sense, to encompass other communities facing similar challenges, such as communities in the Canadian North. Lessons from observing the paraprofessionals in St. Kitts organize their work in efficient ways that are both culturally correct and correspond to international best practices may be transferable to other communities in distant parts of the world.

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