who is CII?
The Community Informatics Initiative (CII) is a research and teaching center focused on working with communities to address their information and technology needs. Our mission is to address literacy in the Internet age, equitable access to the means of digital production, and policy related to communities and information technology.

research perspectives

PARTICIPATORY ACTION RESEARCH - Our toolbox is one of pragmatism and progress, typified by studies which are conducted with the community (collaboration), for the community (may they always see the insights and reap the rewards) and by the community (citizen scientists and community member-led projects). In effect our work is interdisciplinary, multi-method and inherently critical, a diverse and flexible portfolio of what works, involving deductive and inductive techniques and data collection ranging from ethnography to statistics to content analysis to interviews.

COMMUNITY INQUIRY - A process of learning and change.

CYBERPOWER - Community Technology Centers (CTCs) may be a primary "organizational basis for democracy and social inclusion in the information society." (Alkamit and Williams 2002). Cyberpower, or the "effect of online activity on power" is a potential measurable benefit (valuable skills, experiences and social connections gained) from CTC’s for individuals, groups and on an ideological basis. Wolske (2009) adds that CTC’s not only exist in many forms in community organizations but will continue to transform in the future.

integrative strategies
• Storytelling with multimedia
• Relationship building
• Community memory
• Continuing education
• Knowledge sharing

audiences adults, kids, volunteers, staff, and leaders

future settings
Africa (OLPC, Sao Tome)
Small town and rural CTC’s
Undererved communities
Schools and libraries

Social & Environmental Justice

On The Fifth and Hill Toxic Site
Champaign Urbana
(proof of concept demo only)

The Social and Environmental Justice Issues

The problem is not new. A toxic site in the middle of a residential community, and various disputed claims about health hazards it poses to the residents, satisfactory level of remediation, the extent of toxic spread and remediation needed, between those who live in the community and those who live outside it, is only a symptom of larger problems of existing social injustice. It is no coincidence that the mostly African-American neighborhoods in that part of North Champaign are poor. It is also not surprising to find that the particular issue of environmental injustice sits alongside problems of poor relations with law enforcement, and lack of adequate support from local government.

The Map Project

Maps can be used to simply provide visual aid to clarify an issue being talked about. They can also be used as strong arguments independently, or in combination with other tools of arguments such as the Media Project presented on this page. Maps in this case are being used to represent various points. Maps at different zoom levels, with the issue of concern always present and the center brings to focus the different points of concern.

The Media Project

Presented is an example of the kind of media project that may be used. The object of the media project would be twofold. One, to provide visual and creative arguments on the topic. Two, to provide a space for voices and arguments to be heard where one side of the argument in any issue is muffled either due to lack of space to voice arguments because the other side, usually the more powerful side, has effectively declared unilaterally that the debate is over, or the difficulty to organize time and physical location to provide such argument. Consequently, a media project such as this would become, would also be a location for a documented argument in situations where there is no other valid space to submit documents to raise issues.

Future Directions in Community Technology Center Research

education

Technology education has often been perceived as an ends unto itself. In many CTC’s learning to use technology happens solely in computer labs and focuses on imparting basic technical skills (such as typing or using an OS) and indoctrinating learners into almost ritualistic uses of technology. Other centers struggle to provide structured training and have difficulty adapting pre-packaged programs to their needs. Our vision is one of empowerment, and as such, takes a step back from specific emphasis on particular skills or technologies, but instead strategies and ways of thinking that can enable learners to critically engage with their community as well as technology. Our efforts are designed to fall in line with the needs and assets present in a given development site, so as to ensure that they are relevant and welcoming to current staff, volunteers and participants. This is not to say that this development does not involve innovations or new directions—quite on the contrary we aspire to begin with the familiar and go beyond. This semester we’re pioneering a youth digital learning series: Comics and Community Stories, Storytelling in (Step) Motion, and What It’s Like to Fly. (Jeff and Damien)

technology

Community technology centers, small libraries and non-profit organizations all struggle to manage their technology assets. Computer viruses, rapidly changing hardware and burgeoning software options make it difficult for many environments to keep up, never mind navigate, even for experts. To meet this challenge, 21st century organizations require effective and robust management systems that can deliver multiple functions. This semester long study has focused on prototyping dynamic, web-based solutions for these challenges. These include:

• A dynamic inventory system that tracks the "health" of computers, and is capable of transmitting technical information to system administrators in the event of failure. IT administrators can access a complete software and hardware portfolio for each asset, quickly and easily. (Adam)

• A geographic information system which helps visually organize the location of community technology centers in a city or region. GIS tools also enhance the overall situational awareness of organizations. (Adam)

• A knowledge sharing system to allow community help desk organizations to disseminate critical information and improve training efforts. These type of systems help connect experts with beginners, and foster relationship building at all levels of the organization. (Adam)

• Use of the Wordpress Content Management System (CMS) for truly community-driven web resources. (Jeff)

• Web-based technology training guides and tutorials designed to be modular, multimedia and most importantly, empowerment oriented. They not only teach essential digital literacy skills but also encourage relevant and critical use of technology through active and contextualized learning. (Jeff)

• A customized Linux distribution and software built specifically to support community technology education needs. Combined with guides and documentation this helps to ensure sustainability. (Jeff)

methodology

This foray into technology development has also led to ways we might expand community informatics methodology. For instance, future CTC’s equipped with this prototype data management system can be programmed to relay human-computer interaction metrics. The flexibility of the project’s database infrastructure allows for quantitative analysis such as data mining. Community member use of CMS website technologies and contributions to training guide wikis reveal additional records and feedback. In addition, established community relationships provide critical opportunities for interviews and observations as well as researcher reflection and development in context. Once collected and organized this kind of information can offer critical insight into CTC user behaviors, perspectives and outcomes, ultimately building a comprehensive measure of effectiveness.