

Life swap

Computers can change lives. If you don't believe that, ask Janice Owens of Lambeth in south London. She helped set up a scheme to make residents of a housing estate e-literate.

"I see single mums who might have spent months shut in their flat with just the TV and a toddler for company," says Janice. "While they're doing a course here, they meet people like themselves, help each other sort out their problems. They're in contact with people who have made a success of things.

"Within a few weeks they seem to have grown a few inches, they smile, they look smarter. The social aspect is often as important as the technology."

Some 24 million people in Britain, many of them socially or economically disadvantaged, cannot use the internet. As more and more job advertisements and health, education and benefits information are available online, and some three-quarters of the workforce use computers as part of their job, they are increasingly at risk of social exclusion.

The Penceil project (How People Encounter E-Illiteracy) starts from the belief that people's ICT needs have so far been defined by the Government, by training providers, by exam boards, without asking the people themselves.

Mike Cushman, a research fellow at the London School of Economics, has a two-year grant of £190,000 from the Economic and Social Research Council for a project to find out what people actually want. It is a joint project



Silver surfers: the elderly can keep in touch with grandchildren abroad

with NIACE, the National Institute of Adult Continuing Education – an unusual link between the worlds of further and higher education. Together with other academics and local education staff, Mike will work with the residents of St Martin's estate in Lambeth – Janice Owens's estate – to design their own ICT training.

"There has been plenty of government funding for local computer access centres and skills training, but less attention on the people who use them and what their needs are," says Mike.

"So my colleagues and I wanted to involve people in designing programmes to suit their needs."

Two colleagues separately suggested the St Martin's estate as a basis for the project, and Mike found that community groups there had already developed good courses with the local learning centre.

"We found from a survey of the estate in 1998 that people had an overwhelming desire to learn to use computers," says Janice Owens. So she helped to set up the High Trees Community Development Trust, which helps Lambeth residents organise community activities.

Amongst these are a cyber-cycle centre, which reprogrammes donated computers and sells them cheaply to local residents, and ICT learning programmes

designed to meet local people's needs. One project in a sheltered housing scheme helps residents keep in email touch with grandchildren in other countries.

"This is a very deprived area and lots of the trainees are pretty fragile," says Janice. "They feel the dice is loaded against them. Some have never had a job: they've maybe survived by small-time dealing, and now they want to get out of it.

"We set up a Photoshop workshop for a young Portuguese man with poor social skills who was fascinated by PowerPoint, and a PC-practitioner course for an ex-manager who had had a stroke."

Mike has set up an advisory group, including staff from the local college and the adult learning service, as well as academics who have worked on e-literacy and social exclusion.

"I'm going to talk to people who have just joined courses and ask them to put me on to people who haven't," he says. "Why do they want to get involved – or not? Do people actually mind being e-illiterate?"

Janice thinks their answer will be 'yes'. "These courses have changed the whole attitude of people on the estate," she says. "I go by what people tell me and the changes I see in their lives. But you need hard data if you want to get funds to change things. Mike's project will produce some of that hard data."

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