

adults learning

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news

OVERCOMING E-ILLITERACY

The *Pencil* project (How People Encounter E-Illiteracy) starts from the belief that people's IT needs have, for too long, been defined from above: by government, by IT suppliers, by training providers, by exam boards, and so on. The basic questions of how people experience any lack of skills in their daily lives have not been asked: What barriers does it present to them? What do they want to do with the skills they learn?

This is not new. When adult literacy attracted interest in the 1970s providers started by believing they knew what their students wanted. It took some time to realise that asking the students was a necessary part of the process. This experience of getting students to design their literacy curriculum is one of the foundations of *Pencil*. The experience of students, teachers and providers of computer and IT skills is another. A third strand is the work that has been done in defining media and information literacies, but most of this work starts from what is literacy, rather than what it means not to have these skills.

Government and commerce are moving their services to the internet and other computer systems, partly because they can provide a better service that way, but largely

because they can save money by doing it. For instance, Gordon Brown's aim of cutting over 100,000 public service jobs depends upon people using the internet to access services and inputting their own data, rather than civil servants doing it for them.

This raises the question of whose game is being played. Is it the individual who is being given the power to communicate easily with friends and family around the world or are people being fitted in to new ways of doing business for other people's benefit? What is happening to people left outside this electronic loop.

Pencil is premised on the belief that we can answer these questions better if we start from studying illiteracy rather than literacy. The project is being undertaken by the Department of Information Systems at the London School of Economics and Political Science in conjunction with NIACE, and is funded by the Economic and Social Research Council under their e-society programme, for two years from October 2004.

It will be based around a housing estate in Lambeth, South London, and has the support of the local community association, Lambeth College and Lambeth Adult



Learning Service. It will be an action research project, so it will not only try to understand the issues but will also work with local residents to design and implement programmes which will meet their needs.

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