

# **Reaching the “Nexters”:**

## **Youth Participation**

### **and the Strategic Application of Technology**

#### **in the Non-Profit Sector**

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## **Abstract**

*This paper considers the challenges and potential benefits that advances in information and communications technology (ICT) and increased youth participation bring to the non-profit sector. Considering the educational nature of youth participation, strategic integration of ICT is considered to be a question relevant to instructional design and technology (IDT). Activity theory and social constructivism are used to provide theoretical foundations for activity-centered and youth-centered IDT approaches. These are combined to provide general and specific recommendations for individual organizations and inter-organizational networks. Areas for future research are also considered.*

## **Introduction and Objectives**

The non-profit sector is at a crossroads as advances in information and communications technology (ICT) and an increased interest in youth participation challenge traditional practices. Research in the motivations behind and impacts of youth participation has grown (Canadian Centre for Philanthropy, 2002; Youniss, McLellan, Su, & Yates, 1999), and non-profit foundations are hosting websites on information technology planning (CompuMentor, 2004). It would appear that, overall, significant changes are taking place: 68% of Canadian non-profit organizations use their website for strategic applications (Leverus, 2002), and meaningful youth participation is attaining status as a best practice (Wheeler, 2000). Youth between the ages of 18 to 25, termed the “Nexters”, are emerging as a socially aware, well educated, technology literate and innovative generation whose participation is considered to be integral to the development and sustenance of the non-profit sector, and civil society in general (Bentley, 1998; Volunteer Canada, 2001; Zemke, Raines, & Filipczak, 2000).

However, while technology integration and youth participation increase, these two issues are often treated independently. This situation is unfortunate, since strategic integration of technology with attention to youth participation requires an understanding of how and where these developments intersect, and what theoretical and practical considerations are most relevant. The position held in this paper is that, since research in youth service is consistent in its appraisal of meaningful youth participation as an educational endeavour, this theory and practice should draw from the field of instructional design and technology (IDT).

To undertake this investigation, this paper is presented in three parts. In the first section, activity theory is employed as a model to assess and draw implications associated with the disruptions and stabilizations caused by advances in ICT and youth participation. In the second section, social constructivism is compared with youth participation as a means to develop suggestions for youth-focused IDT strategies. In the third section, these findings are drawn together to form IDT strategies and relevant applications that emphasize and enable meaningful youth participation. Areas for future research are also recommended.

## **Technology and the “Nexters” in the non-profit sector:**

### **An activity-centered perspective**

The confluence of trends that the non-profit sector is facing makes it difficult to discern which change in practice influences which. Looking at an issue in isolation, such as technology integration, disregards the complex, interdependent range of activities involved. In order to conceptualize a technology strategy meant to increase and sustain youth participation, this interrelationship between shifts in practice needs consideration. A useful tool for this kind of multilayered analysis is activity theory.

Activity theory perceives all human activity, tool application and subsequent productivity as socio-culturally and socio-historically embedded (Engeström, 1999). The integration of new technology affects other changes for “[t]echnologies alter the activity and are, in turn, altered by the activity” (Jonassen, Hernandez-Serrano, & Choi, 2000) This includes the roles and intentions of those involved, and the rules governing and results of the activity (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999, p.62). This is an iterative process, created by the need to stabilize a disrupted or contradicted activity that is

undergoing innovative change and is gradually expanding into the larger system of interrelated activities (Engeström, 1999). Thus, an activity-centered design approach is user-involved, emergent, and attentive to the multiple contexts in which a design or tool may be used (Gay & Hembrooke, 2004).

Such an approach makes sense for the non-profit sector, as the integration of ICT, for example, can propose “radical” transformations of embedded organizational practices (Burt & Taylor, 2001 p.316). The following section analyzes what these transformations are by looking at the disruptions and contradictions caused by increased ICT and youth participation, and the stabilizing practices being employed to provide solutions and manage change.

## **Disruptions and contradictions**

The main disruptions and contradictions facing the non-profit sector in embracing youth participation and new advances in ICT are threefold: increased demands on human and financial resources; tension between centralized and distributed governance; and, pressure to be more competitive.

### ***Increased demands on resources***

While leaders in the non-profit sector feel that they must leverage technology more strategically to stay viable, they also argue that they do not have the necessary financial capital to do so (IM/IT Secretariat, 2002). Untrained staff, lack of time, underestimation of the human resources and inadequate support from boards and funding agencies are other challenges being faced (PRA Inc., 2001). Youth initiatives also

require an allocation of resources, both financial and human, which can be a hard sell for some organizations that are just managing their workload (Volunteer Canada, 2001).

### ***Tension between centralized and distributed governance***

With the changes facing the non-profit sector, the lines between centralized and distributed governance are being questioned. In the case of Friends of the Earth (UK), the integration of technology into campaigning was delimited to avoid causing concern that the organization was pursuing centralization (Burt & Taylor, 2001). While youth development organizations move towards collaborative, youth-involved strategies, they must also grapple with learning and applying new value-based behaviours (Jarvis, Shear, & Hughes, 1997). However, few non-profit organizations are prepared for the power-sharing and role-shifting required of meaningful youth participation (O'Donoghue, Kirshner, & McLaughlin, 2002).

### ***Pressure to be more competitive***

Collaborations between the profit and non-profit sectors are complex as competition between them in service and information delivery has increased (Kellogg Foundation, 2000; Te'eni & Young, 2003). A common reaction to this increasingly blurred distinction is for non-profit organizations to be tempted into “organizational empire building, turning resources to organizational self-promotion and competitions with collegial organizations” (Wheeler, 2000 p.52), a contrary force to the missions of most non-profit organizations.

## **Stabilizations and solutions**

While these disruptions and contradictions seem comprehensive, the stabilizations and solutions being employed are also expansive. These include the creation of inter-organizational networks, increased intra-organizational collaboration, and innovations in program efficiency and reach.

### ***Creation of inter-organizational networks***

Inter-organizational networking, resource and cost sharing are considered key ingredients to enabling the program innovations that ICT can offer, especially for smaller, isolated non-profit organizations (Kellogg Foundation, 2000; PRA Inc., 2001). Wheeler (2000) cites changes in management and youth development practices in the new global, networked economy as a demonstration that “[t]he value of the youth development organization in the future will be determined by the organization’s collaborations, connections, capacity, and contribution to the common good, rather than by its resources or client base” (p. 51).

### ***Increased intra-organizational collaboration***

One of the main opportunities created by advances in communications technology is the increased capacity for information and knowledge sharing between staff, volunteers, and colleagues (Murray & Harrison, 2002). Most organizations use their websites to provide information access, although interactive features such as event calendars and discussion boards are in effect in 25% to 50% of Canadian non-profit organizations (Leverus, 2002). Intra-organizational collaboration also involves treating youth as a

source of “fresh and energetic perspectives” who often have “outstanding technology skills” (Volunteer Canada, 2001, p.12).

### ***Innovations in program efficiency and reach***

ICT integration enables innovations in program efficiency, such as assisting in coordinating online volunteer matching (Kellogg Foundation, 2000) or managing a Helpline (Burt & Taylor, 2001). As well, program reach can be expanded through online press conferences (Wallace, 2001), or the creation of international information exchange for global campaigns (Burt & Taylor, 2001). Youth involvement is part of this expanded reach as youth contribute to community wellbeing and, through involvement, they learn inter-personal and employability skills (Sherman, 2002; Twiss & Cooper, 2000).

### **Implications**

These findings lead to the following implications for an activity-centered IDT in the non-profit sector:

- *Involve youth meaningfully in the organization.* Youth participation shouldn't be treated in isolation. Youth should be involved in the strategizing, organizing and implementation of youth initiatives, and other programs as well.
- *Seek balance in types of projects undertaken.* Small interventions are as important as large ones. Balance must be struck between outcomes, inputs, and effects on the organizational practices.

- *Provide relevant training and support.* ICT integration and youth involvement require properly trained staff and youth who are able to provide support and guidance. Boards need to support such training initiatives.
- *Carefully pursue collaborative networks.* Well planned networks and collaborative relationships provide opportunities for cost and information sharing. Youth participation is a common rallying point that can frame such partnerships.

While these implications have broad significance to the non-profit sector, they are not detailed enough to develop a comprehensive IDT strategy to promote and sustain meaningful youth participation. The following section addresses this by looking at youth engagement in the non-profit sector through the lens of social constructivism.

## **Social constructivism and the “Nexters” in the non-profit sector: A youth-centered perspective**

Although many studies address why youth volunteer, the information they provide can be deceiving (Hustinx & Lammertyn, 2003). For example, while many youth state that they volunteer for instrumental reasons such as gaining work experience, within a youth development perspective this is both validated and promoted (Larson, 2000). As well, while a youth may have an intended aim at the outset, it is quite possible that his or her motivations will change over time (Davis, Hall, & Meyer, 2003). These issues are examples of what can be termed social constructivism, a learning theory that can provide insight into how to frame an effective, youth-focused technology strategy.

Social constructivism draws from similar antecedents and principles as activity theory. The shifts in practice in the non-profit sector previously discussed are what

Engeström (1999) would describe as a communal, unrestrained *zone of proximal development* (ZPD). This term, first employed by Vygotsky (1978), describes the socio-historical and socio-cultural, mediating role of interpersonal communication, interaction and applied tool use in human development. In social constructivism, the ZPD is a learner-centered concept rather than activity-centered one (Quintana, Krajcik, & Soloway, 2001). As such, social constructivism theorizes how learners construct knowledge in groups using shared tools, and common language, rules and conduct (Davis, Sumara, & Luce-Keppler, 2000).

The question for the non-profit sector is how to conceptualize youth-focused IDT that supports youth in learning of, commitment to and involvement in organizational tasks, and at the same time, aids their psycho-social development. Social constructivism can assist this investigation as it incorporates aspects of formal, non-formal and informal education constructs: a learning environment common to most non-profit organizations.

### **Common themes**

There are four themes that emerge from comparing the literature in youth participation with social constructivism: the acceptance and provision of multiple representations of youth participation; the role of learning in context; the crucial aspect of facilitating interpersonal communication; and the importance of encouraging self-reflection.

#### ***Multiple representations***

An area where youth engagement links with social constructivism is relation to how past experience and knowledge shape a youth’s expectation and approach to

participation. Research indicates that these are influenced by many factors, from the job market to family environment (Wilson & Musick, 1997). Motivations behind volunteer engagement are also varied and changeable across time (Batson, Ahmad, & Tsang, 2002), and thus, non-profit organizations should be sensitive to youth expectations and, at the same time, encourage exploration of other possibilities. Social constructivism also addresses these issues by treating learning environments as being shaped by the learners’ experiences and knowledge of the subject matter and by diverse learning styles (Richardson, 2003). Thus, social constructivist IDT aims to provide a variety of perspectives and activities, and tries to ground these in the experiences and knowledge of the learners (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999).

### ***Learning in context***

A second area where youth participation overlaps with social constructivism deals with the importance of learning and applying skills and knowledge in real-world contexts. Youth engagement is considered a way for youth to present their talents, apply their cognitive skills, and aid in their transition from school to work (Twiss & Cooper, 2000). As well, involvement in decision making and making a positive impact enables youth to develop initiative and a “language of agency” (Heath, 1997, cited in Larson, 2000; O’Donoghue et al., 2002). These concepts are reflected in the principle of social constructivism that states learning is best facilitated through contextually-based, ill-structured problems (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999). While virtual replication of the real world is arguably an impossibility (Petraglia, 1998), multimedia can be integrated such that youth can co-construct their understanding of their participation in different non-profit organizations, or across settings. As with decision making and multiple

intentionality in meaningful youth participation, effective IDT would include learning through developing multimedia, not just from it (Jonassen, Myers, & McKillop, 1996), and non-linear, interactive progression (Caircross & Mannion, 2001).

### ***Interpersonal communication***

The role of socialization involved in non-profit work is another link between youth participation and social constructivism. Youth engagement with peers and adults in community-based activity promotes strong interpersonal and leadership skills (Dworkin, Larson, & Hansen, 2002). This maturation has lasting impact and has been described as the connection between a youth’s acknowledgement of their “agency” with a developed sense of “communion” (Jones & Abes, 2004; Magolda, 2000). Youth activity across time has also been shown as permeable in context to societal and technological change and through innovations shared intergenerationally (Rogoff, Baker-Sennett, Lacasa, & Goldsmith, 1995). This is also a component of social constructivist learning theory, wherein meaning making is considered a shared, dialogical process (Jonassen et al., 2000). Equal participation of youth with adults and more experienced peers in a “community of practice” would be a social constructivist notion as well, derived from principles of situated learning (Lave & Wenger, 2002). Thus, conversation and collaboration tools, such as an online chat room, would be included in social constructivist IDT (Jonassen & Rohrer-Murphy, 1999).

### ***Self-reflection***

A final correlation between youth participation and social constructivism concerns self-reflection and the internalization of new knowledge, skills and value-based

behaviours. One conclusion made by researchers is that reflective, meaningful youth participation impacts a youth’s civic Identity, sense of social justice and long term commitment to civic engagement (Youniss et al., 1999). This process is gradual, requiring participation in diverse settings, such that youth can reflect upon and assert his or her capacity to affect how social, economic and environmental conditions relate to poverty, power and politics (Bentley, 1998). Social constructivism would describe the development of civic Identity through youth participation as “meaningful learning” that “involves wilful, intentional, active, conscious, constructive practice that includes reciprocal intention–action–reflection cycles” (Jonassen et al., 2000, p.111). In social constructivist IDT this learning process is supported and encouraged, again, through social networking software, such as a web-based bulletin board (Jonassen et al., 2000).

## **Implications**

To summarize the relevant information arising from this investigation, the following suggestions for youth-focused IDT are as follows:

- *Incorporate diverse, contextualized perspectives and problems.* Accommodate youth experience and expectations by contextualizing content in real-world scenarios that encourage dialogue, teamwork and creative problem solving.
- *Incorporate conversational and collaborative tools.* Use web boards, chat rooms, and document sharing to enable peer and inter-generational communication, leadership development, co-construction of meaning, and reflective practice.

- *Incorporate youth-focused and youth developed, interactive multimedia.* Develop interactive multimedia with youth that focuses on their experience in the organization to contextualize content and address youth diversity.

The implementation of suggestions such as these depends on such factors as organizational capacity, staff expertise, and youth “buy-in”. Thus, where the previous activity-centered design implications did not provide enough detail about youth needs, these implications do not provide enough relationship to societal and organizational context. For this reason, the following section merges these two sets of implications into a series of recommendations for sustainable ICT integration strategies.

## **Non-profit organizations and the “Nexters”:**

### **Recommendations for strategic technology planning**

This paper has highlighted how ICT and youth participation are effecting inter-organizational collaboration and inter-generational power sharing, among other practices. A strategy for integrating technology must comprise these developments and, at the same time, be attentive to a youth-focused approach to IDT. As well, strategic planning needs to be cognizant of what technological applications are possible, accessible and appropriate for the scope and capacity of an organization or network of organizations. In this respect, the recommendations that follow are divided into two sections: the first targets strategies for individual organizations and collaborative networks of organizations; and, the second section addresses the relevant applications that could be used to pursue these strategic directions.

## Strategies

Depending on the context, strategic planning will encompass different possibilities. To illustrate this, the following section is divided into three parts: general strategies relevant to all non-profit organizations; specific strategies for individual non-profit organizations; and specific strategies for inter-organizational networks and partnerships.

### *General strategies for all non-profit organizations*

- *See youth as valuable members of the organization.* Involve youth meaningfully in decision making and planning. Youth internships or service learning opportunities can provide youth leadership and expertise in the organization.
- *Pursue creating a learning organization.* Seek to understand the needs and capacities of staff and youth, provide needed training and support, and strive to keep lines of communication open to strengthen ICT and youth initiatives.
- *Keep it simple, take one step at a time, and stay open to alternatives.* Choose projects carefully, taking small, well implemented steps, over large unwieldy ones. Pilot test and stay open to solutions that delimit or that don't include technology.
- *Share knowledge and expertise, and learn from others.* Offer organizational resources for the common good and learn from the proven effective and ineffective approaches and materials of other non-profit organizations.

***Specific strategies for individual organizations***

- *Develop a virtual community for youth<sup>1,2</sup>.* Incorporate online conversational tools and shared youth/adult responsibility for moderating discussions to support youth interaction, group decision making, problem solving, and reflection.
- *Make website interactive and youth driven.* Provide recruitment information, online forms, on-the-job training materials, and training-related activities. Allow youth to co-design the site and the materials, and be the webmasters of the site.
- *Integrate youth-focused/developed digital media.* Capture the different activities and perspectives of youth in the organization by incorporating youth-developed and/or youth-focused multimedia into the organization’s website.

***Specific strategies for inter-organizational networks and partnerships***

- *Encourage inter-organizational youth connections.* Use collaborative and conversational tools to link youth across organizations and enable community building, group action and reflection on interpersonal agency and civic identity.
- *Develop a shared virtual community with a learning object repository<sup>3</sup>.* Develop common web space to share multimedia, online activities and IDT approaches, and use these to develop online training, recruitment or other initiatives.

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<sup>1</sup> For more information on virtual communities, see Schwier, R.A. (2001). Characteristics, elements and catalysts of virtual learning communities. *Quarterly Review of Distance Education*, 1(2), 5-23.

<sup>2</sup> For information related to the non-profit sector and online communities, see Benton Foundation. (2003). Benchmarks for building extranets and online communities. Retrieved April 10, 2005, from [http://www.benton.org/publibrary/capacity/extranet\\_benchmarks.doc](http://www.benton.org/publibrary/capacity/extranet_benchmarks.doc)

<sup>3</sup> For best practices associated with learning object repositories, see Collis, B., & Strijker, A. (2001). New pedagogies and re-usable learning objects: Towards a new economy in education. *Journal of Educational Technology Systems*, 20(2), 137-157.

- *Develop a community-based media center.* With organizations that are close in proximity, develop a media center to communally own and share multimedia equipment and software, and deliver programs and training for youth and staff.

## **Applications**

These strategies involve various levels of organizational technology infrastructure and technology literacy (NPower, 2002). For the purposes of this paper, the breadth of this discussion will be contained by focusing on social networking software, such as email, and extranets, or online communities, as applied in organizations with low, moderate and high levels of technology infrastructure. In general, low to moderate technology infrastructure and related applications describe the current situation for the non-profit sector (Surman, 2001).

When reading through the suggestions that follow, it is important to keep in mind certain issues. First, software applications and the technology needed to make them possible are always developing. Striving after the latest trend may not be as fruitful as discovering the ways technology is being applied in more moderate, “tried and tested” infrastructure environments. Even with low infrastructure an organization can still engage in a creative and strategic technology integration (Cravens, January 4, 2004). Second, the issue of technology infrastructure is not solely related to organizations, but to the infrastructure available to the youth involved in the organization. Finally, it is usually the case that organizations outsource their website to another company or vendor, and this process requires collaboration and clear partnership principles (Benton Foundation, 2003). In this context, technology infrastructure needs to be seen as a distributed concept.

### ***Levels of infrastructure***

For the purposes of this paper, low infrastructure is computer equipment over 5 years old, dialup to low speed Internet access, and limited hard drive capacity. Moderate infrastructure consists of computers bought within the last 5 years, medium to high speed Internet, and the hard drive capacity to store images, web documents, and limited amounts of video and audio files. A high level of infrastructure would include computers bought within the last two years, high speed Internet access, the hard drive capacity to store large amounts of data, including images and video, and the capacity to house a website with extended interactive capabilities.

### ***Social networking software***

Social networking software is an emergent term that provides the most appropriate conceptualization of the relevant strategic applications of technology for youth participation. The term comprises the features of computer supported collaborative work (CSCW), such as computer conferencing, group calendaring and scheduling, and group document handling (Jones, 2003), as well as other applications less stringently connected to work environments (Allen, 2004), such as blogging, networked gaming, and less directed online chatting (Shirky, 2003).

- *Social software - low infrastructure.* With this level of infrastructure, text-based messaging is possible using email accounts or email groups with Yahoo! or MSN. Setting up a blog – an ongoing log of ideas and information- through Google (Google, 2005) and a Wiki - shared document building software – through different hosting organizations (Cunningham, 2005) would be also possible,

although it might cause frustration uploading new information. With low speed Internet access, enough processing capacity and the right Windows or Apple platform, it would also be possible to chat online with Microsoft Messenger (see medium infrastructure), and develop online surveys through free services such as SurveyMonkey.com (SurveyMonkey.com, 2004).

- *Social software - medium infrastructure.* With a medium level of infrastructure, text based messaging, blogging, and group document building would be much quicker and could be augmented with audio and video conferencing using Windows Messenger or NetMeeting for Windows platforms or iChat for Apple platforms. Another conferencing option could include having youth participants set up Internet telephone accounts with Skype (Skype Technologies S.A., 2005). While these technologies are available, they are far from trouble free and demand that youth have access to the necessary computer technology as well.
- *Social software - high infrastructure.* With high infrastructure, organizations can incorporate all of the above mentioned social software, but can do so with more internal controls. By this it is meant that the organization can house their own website and purchase software, such as WebBoard (Akiva Corporation, 2005), and design and manage their blogs, email groups, online meetings, etc. from their own server. As well, survey programs could be purchased and housed on a server, providing for large scale information gathering on needs and issues related to youth participation.

One of the major distinctions between these applications is the question of how and where they are housed. Social networking software can be run separately on a distributed network of computers, by accessing a series of third party sites, or can, with increased infrastructure be housed on one server, directly or jointly managed by a non-profit organization or network of organizations. This distinction is a matter related to the role, capacity and versatility of an organization’s extranet, which is addressed in the next section.

### ***Extranets***

An extranet is a broad term meant to encompass the multiple ways that an organization can develop an online community, including, but not resting solely on, social networking applications. It can be seen as a means of increasing the amount of knowledge and skill sharing within an organization, and thus can be viewed as a knowledge management tool to support the development, flow and creation of knowledge (Schwen, Kalman, Hara, & Kisling, 1998). In this context, and in reference to youth participation, an extranet could be seen as a means to provide youth with the opportunity to internalize the explicit knowledge of the organization, to externalize their own implicit knowledge and skills, to develop new ideas and practices by comparing their ideas and experiences with other youth and adults, and for youth to learn through peer and adult modeling.

- *Extranet - Low infrastructure.* Developing an interactive extranet with low technology infrastructure is, while more challenging, still possible. Website

design will have to remain simple, text-based, possibly with some images.

External links can be listed for access to email groups, web boards or blogs.

Text-based training materials, on-the-job aids, calendaring, and other updates are also possible, although with dial up Internet, updating a third party hosted web page could prove frustrating. Organizations can purchase web page design software, use HTML coding, look for freeware, or use the software that may be available through their Internet provider.

- *Extranet - Moderate infrastructure.* With moderate infrastructure, it is possible to begin looking at including multimedia in association with social networking software. With Windows and Mac platforms purchased in the last 5 years, video editing software is included, which would provide limited in-house video production capacity. With a microphone and installing voice recording software, such as Wavepad for Microsoft Windows or QuickVoice for Apple, organizations can also include audio and PowerPoint presentations for online training develop with or by youth. Hard drive space may be a problem, and so a storage system would have to be developed with digital video tapes and CDs (data, and multimedia) being used to keep space available.
- *Extranet - High infrastructure.* A high technology infrastructure can afford many possibilities for organizations, including the in-house development of complete multimedia training programs using video editing, web design or multimedia authoring programs. Housing multimedia and social networking software on an

extranet can provide possibilities for the development of a constantly developing repository of multimedia and text documents on a variety of subjects and topics. This would require a system of information retrieval and organization, and a high degree of planning and management over the website hosting.

Taken in this perspective, the design, building and maintenance of an extranet must be seen a collaborative process, requiring intensive and ongoing needs assessment regarding those for whom the extranet is intended (Benton Foundation, 2003). Inclusion of multimedia can be afforded with higher levels of technology infrastructure; however, the inclusion of video and audio and “flashy” animations does not equal a better extranet. What must be kept in mind at all times is the role the extranet plays in aiding youth participation, and thus, as has been discussed, should draw from principles and practices social constructivist IDT.

## Conclusion

In their book entitled, *Generations at work*, Zemke, Raines & Filipczak (2000), conclude that youth under 25 years are a creative, sophisticated generation that will excel in the workforce and challenge traditional practices in the non-profit sector. They write,

“The Nexters will be our best educated generation ever, and they will probably continue their education well into adulthood to keep up with rapidly changing technology. Add to this formula their ability to use technology in unforeseen ways, and they seem uniquely poised to become the workforce everyone has been looking for.” (p. 144)

This optimistic outlook is mirrored by research in the field that demonstrate high youth participation rates and interest in issues of social justice (Bentley, 1998). Nevertheless, while this positive development may exist, socio-economic disparities between youth and

between communities still create digital divides (Nunn, 1999), and many youth hold serious reservations about the Internet, including its addictive nature and danger to personal security (Wiebe, Shaver, & Wogalter, 2003).

From an analysis of the literature in the fields of youth participation and non-profit sector management, it seems clear that this contradictory, intergenerational and technological push-and-pull is affecting the way the non-profit sector organizes itself. This paper has tried to explore this phenomenon, and has attempted, through applying constructs and principles of activity-theory and social constructivism, to provide a starting point for non-profit organizations to develop a holistic ICT strategy attuned to the “Nexter” generation. The main conclusion is that ICT needs to be incorporated inclusively and collaboratively, within the bounds of organizational capacity. Said differently, information and communications technology needs to be seen as part of an organization’s broader youth participation strategy, and not vice-versa.

This study linked together these two issues that, in most studies, only cursorily address each other, and concluded with both theoretical and practical aspects of a youth-focused and activity-centered technology strategy. While there are many studies assessing how the volunteer sector as a whole is integrating technology in its operations, and many studies which look specifically at the benefits and best practices associated with meaningful youth participation, what is missing are the case studies, the program evaluations and qualitative investigations of how and where these two developments in the non-profit sector are merging.

The general disparity of research in this area is problematic for many reasons. For one, considering the complex and rich educational environment of youth participation

and its role in the continuance of a healthy civil society, it seems crucial that researchers in IDT give the non-profit sector the same attention they do to formal education and for-profit training settings. For the non-profit sector, attention needs to be paid to researching and sharing experiences with and best practices associated with youth-focused extranet communities and youth-involved technology strategies, including multimedia development. Together, researchers in IDT and in the non-profit sector should work towards conceptualizing a technology strategy that pursues the broader mission of increasing youth participation across organizations, including school-community partnerships.

In this respect, the marrying of ICT and the non-profit sector for the purposes of nurturing, guiding and learning from youth seems a very worthwhile endeavor. While this paper has only touched the surface of these issues, it is hoped that the information provided can assist in moving non-profit organizations forward in the goal of reaching and supporting the “Nexters” in their quest for agency, communion and meaning.

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