Joining the Celtic Tiger

ICT training leads inner-city Dubliners toward the booming Irish economy

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Evidence Narratives at the Center for Information & Society

This paper is part of a project at the Center for Information and Society to broaden and deepen our understanding of the impact of Information and Communication Technologies and Development (ICTD).

Our intention is to choose examples of ICTD implementations carefully and to write about them in such a way that each one, individually, illustrates important aspects of the featured settings and so that, taken together, the examples describe and reveal larger themes about core aspects of ICTD. It is our hope that by being systematic at every stage in the research process we are able to expedite the accumulation of credible and accessible information about the impact of ICTD on individuals and communities.

The ICTD field is filled with success stories extolling the benefits of access to Information Technology. As these often rhetorically powerful and memorable stories describe what can be achieved under the best of conditions, they may distort our understanding of what is achieved more typically, or may fail to describe aspects of their settings or strategies that were crucial to success.

Each setting in which ICTD projects are implemented is unique, but our experience is that with careful attention to the idiosyncrasies and commonalities across settings, patterns soon emerge which reveal more general themes about the qualities of settings, people, and programs that make a difference.

While tension may exist between an organization's desire to feature certain cases and the critical researcher's commitment to rigor, we believe that a methodology built on intensive questioning and attention to detail can yield stories that uncover and communicate an accumulation of credible evidence about why individual programs and larger strategies succeed and fail.

By crafting exemplary stories, by developing and disseminating useful methodological tools, and by promoting these techniques among NGO managers and grant makers, CIS aims to shape a research framework that can fulfill the needs of NGOs and donors, with stories that accurately represent realities in underserved communities, accumulating evidence that serves the ends of rigorous analysis while publicizing good work.

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Lay-offs and chronic unemployment have been an enduring, generational story for the urban Irish. So when the Celtic Tiger's economic roar began to be heard across the country over past decade, many inner-city Dubliners didn't believe that it would touch their lives. For Alan Lyons, a twenty-year career at a Dublin tobacco warehouse vanished overnight: he was made redundant. Alan was down, but not out, and he was determined not to let the lay-off dictate his future. He took a risk, followed a lead, and went back to school to develop the skills of an ICT professional.

To those in his neighborhood, "back to school" seems like an impossibility. Alan, however, showed his community a different approach: by joining ICT training courses offered in his Local Authority housing complex – or public housing project – he not only developed much-needed e-skills, and a earned a college certification, he now balances employment as an ICT trainer and digital photographer. Of the thousands served by the Digital Community e-skills project, about one hundred have become foot soldiers in an on-the-job training program – an intensive process that grooms them with much-needed job skills, and a better chance at contributing to and benefiting from Ireland's economic progress.

Apprenticeships in a New Profession

The Digital Community project offers two types of education programs. First, the broad portfolio of ICT courses and network of public access points serve many inner city residents, providing basic access and strengthening life skills and job skills. Roughly 2,000 are served each year either as drop-in users or formal trainees at the 23 centers across Dublin. Second, students that demonstrate a commitment to the program over time become eligible for intensive job training that involves advanced ICT training, then teacher training, and culminates in a well-paid on-the-job ICT apprenticeship – funded by the project. Roughly one hundred graduates have followed this track all the way to the apprenticeship.

The apprenticeship is intended to provide employment and to establish a proven track record in a work environment. According to Peter Byrne, the project director, the on-the-job training program is built around the widely recognized axiom among job hunters: "it is easier to find a job when you already have a job." The simplicity of Peter's approach is intended to provide strategic handholds that give trainees a legitimate chance to climb out of generational unemployment and poverty, and the crime and violence that are never far behind.

For Alan, who grew up in a public housing tenement, the connection to Digital Community began when he was one of 270 workers laid off from a tobacco-shipping warehouse. "Tobacco has gradually moved east as the legislation in the EU has grown stronger and stronger," Alan explained. Eventually the other 230 were let go when the whole warehouse was shut down and the operation moved abroad. It was time for a fresh start.

Alan initially tried to find other warehouse work, and soon realized that he wasn't

Through the Digital Community project John Devoy works as a community center manager, and now is enrolled in the advanced Microsoft IC3 program – on his way to certification as an ICT professional.

really starting over – just reverting back to an old life. The patterns were the same, "just the faces were new." He wanted a change. "I was doing a fifty hour week in a warehouse and not seeing the light of day… it was very much deadline oriented: 'why wasn't this met, how come that machine broke and why no one told us, how come there are still seven pallets due to go when it's four o'clock in the afternoon?'"

Like many inner-city Dubliners, over the years Alan moved from the original tenements to the more modern Local Authority housing complexes. There he ran into the Digital Community project operating out of one of the complex community centers. Alan began by taking a "Comic Life" course, learning how to convert his hobby of digital photography into graphic novel storyboards. He was hooked. After learning about the possibility of an ICT apprenticeship through the project, he signed up for the advanced Microsoft training curriculum offered by Digital Community. Other training followed. Now he is a university-certified ICT trainer learning valuable skills on-the-job.

After being laid off from his warehouse job, Alan Lyons built himself a new profession. He wove together digital photography and ICT training contract work into a career that supports his family.

College Accreditation

The professional path for the Digital Community foot soldiers begins with rigorous training: basic digital literacy, then the advanced curriculum, and finally a thirty-hour teacher training course at the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT). A pair of certifications then follows these courses: the Centiport exam is offered to advanced training graduates, and finally a Community Professional Development certification is awarded by DIT. The DIT degree is a college-level vocational education accreditation.
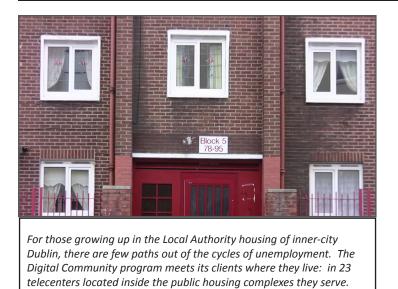
After certification, students who are selected to participate in the intensive ICT and teacher training program give back to Digital Community. Participants serve three months as volunteer trainers in one of the 23 centers in the most disadvantaged areas across Dublin. If that final step is successfully completed, the volunteers are then hired through the DIT-Digital Community partnership as paid apprentice trainers.

A Professional Wage

One of the main carrots drawing Digital Community graduates through the gauntlet of educational requirements is the professional salary they will receive as ICT apprentice trainers: 38 Euros an hour. The program theory is that these key elements – industry and college certification, teacher training, job experience, and professional wage – will prepare graduates to successfully gain employment in the private sector.

The elements enable graduates to experience personal success. For a young program like the Digital Community, explains Tommy Cooke of the DIT, the transition to future jobs will take time. Generational poverty is not broken overnight. According to Tommy, "Personal empowerment and community empowerment. Inevitably, employment will come out of that."

Certification and good wages draw students who then become teachers and role models for others. As trainees succeed, momentum builds. During a recent interview with trainers and students, Brendan

For those growing up in the Local Authority housing of inner-city Dublin, there are few paths out of the cycles of unemployment. The Digital Community program meets its clients where they live: in 23 telecenters located inside the public housing complexes they serve.

Wicks, a trainer at the Block 5 public housing complex, explained the theme: "They say, 'I know him. If he can do it, I can do it.'" When the students first show up, "they don't believe." They need convincing that these trainings can help them. Slowly, they realize that the trainers and center managers are just like them: fellow Dubliners from the housing projects; neighbors who have experienced many of the same dead-end jobs. And yet now they have professional certification, a college-level degree, and knowledge of ICT so strong that they are able to pass it on to the rest of the community. Apprenticeship not only provides trainers with valuable job skills, it also builds credibility in the community. The center managers and trainers need to be "cop-on" – or street-wise – Peter explains, so that they can protect the hardware and create respect for the training process.

The role of the apprentice-trainers is an important part of building trust and successfully helping drop-in users or others seeking basic skills. John Devoy and his colleagues understand the resistance to and fear of formal education. Their neighborhood savvy as well as techniques they learned in teacher training courses shape their approach. John tells of one woman who was trying to move up from a childcare position to a spot as a manger in a care facility for the disabled. John helped her with her e-skills, and supported her as she upgraded her CV. "We sent her off and she got the job."

Small individual accomplishments can represent significant strides for many in Dublin public housing. Project Director Peter Byrne says growing up in Local Authority housing is "like living in a fishbowl – they can move around, and see the outside world, but they can't get there." Breaking out of underemployment takes self-confidence as well as new skills, requiring time and trust. Tommy Cooke, of DIT, explains how the Digital Community is more than a jobs program or an education program. Instead, it is about "self-esteem, confidence, and then motivation... That's what started our work with computers."

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Slipping Away, into the Private Sector...

Peter describes the final stage of the employment track as "letting them slip away." He has watched some of his core graduates disappear into the private sector. After a year or so into their apprenticeships, some graduates come to believe that they can find skilled work in the ICT sector. "For the first time in their lives," Peter explains, "they think: 'I can be part of the Celtic Tiger.'" As the program matures, Digital Community expects more and more such graduates will slip away.

Alan Lyons – the laid off warehouse worker who came to the program through an interest in digital photography – has one foot in the training centers, and the other in the private sector. Alan now has more work than he can handle, juggling ICT trainings for the project and professional photography on the side, and he has faith that the program will continue to benefit others too.

Standing in the courtyard of the Block 5 housing complex on a winter afternoon, Alan explains the programs' cultural orientation: "the Irish are very community oriented." Amidst the residents' shouts back and forth between their flats, Alan talks about the value of placing the training centers inside the complexes. Recalling the old days in the tenements, Alan describes how residents lived "in a long line of houses, you could move in and out of your house every day and not meet the people down at the corner. Here everybody shares the same entrance." This idea of a common path is reflected in the busy entrances to the training centers too, and in the new ICT knowledge and new opportunities passing through those doorways and into the digital community.

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AUTHOR

Mark West is an ethnographer whose international research and work in the development field is based in South Asia and in Central and Eastern Europe. Mark's fieldwork has centered on the use of critical ethnography to bring a more participatory connection between local communities and international development projects.

In South Asia, Mark's research and work focus on the resistance networks of rural Dalits, or "untouchables," with a particular interest in the grassroots campaigns of barefoot lawyers. In Central and Eastern Europe he has worked to improve the transparency and communications of newly developing court systems. Since 2007, Mark has begun conducting fieldwork with the CIS on the economic and social impact of ICT programs in marginalized communities around the world.

Mark has served as a rule of law consultant with the United States Agency for International Development in Eastern Europe, and as a Human Rights Field Mentor with Stanford LawSchool. He holds a J.D. from the University of Washington, and is a Ph.D. Candidate in the School of Communication and Department of Anthropology at Northwestern University.