# Fathers and Sons

## Developing new traditions of education in Ireland

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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.

This paper is an example and an experiment in this methodological landscape. It is supported in large part by a grant from Microsoft Community Affairs. Direction, guidance and leadership has been provided by Andrew Gordon of the Daniel J. Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington. Joe Sullivan, staff researcher at the Center for Information and Society, is the lead editor for this project.

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In the traditional Catholic communities of Dublin, the financial decisions of loving fathers used to be more limited in scope: "it was about getting kids shoes for their confirmations, and getting food from the cheapest shops," remembers John Hogg. These days, things are changing. Even in the inner city, the most disadvantaged schools have begun to modernize their curriculum and offer ICT courses at the elementary school level. As a result, families prioritize differently. Thinking back a few years, John laughs: "the last thing on the father's mind was getting the kid a computer."

Times have changed in the neighborhoods of Ireland, and the changes are part of a major economic transformation underway nationwide. For those in the inner city, an opportunity today is seen to break the cycles of manual labor passed down from generation to generation. One place that the break is occurring is in computer training classrooms across Dublin.

John Hogg is a community development worker, and the manager of a City Council-funded community center in central Dublin. John recalls how low-skilled jobs and the wages they bring had become entrenched as family traditions. "Their kids were becoming laborers, but now they don't have to."

At his community center, John walks past a table full of sports trophies – one award belongs to the local winners of a Street League soccer tournament, a program for street kids. In the community center one room has a ping pong table, the other is full of computers. The computer skills lab is part of a city-wide program in Dublin run through a partnership between the Dublin Institute of Technology (DIT) and a non-profit organization called the Digital Community. These programs first brought access to ICT training to every kid in the poorest areas in Dublin through a program that blanketed the neediest schools. Then they took the e-skills one step further: to the parents of these children through community centers like John's.

## Plugging-In for a New Education

When the DIT-Digital Community partnership began a few years ago, it was a humble effort to recycle some redundant staff computers from the Institute of Technology. DIT decided to provide the computers to twenty "Disadvantaged Status Schools" – inner city primary and secondary schools in the most downtrodden and crime-ridden areas of Dublin. As this program took off, it grew to include all 42 Disadvantaged Status Schools, extending an opportunity for e-skills development to the neediest children in the city.

As the school programs became more solidified, they were supplemented by a handful of
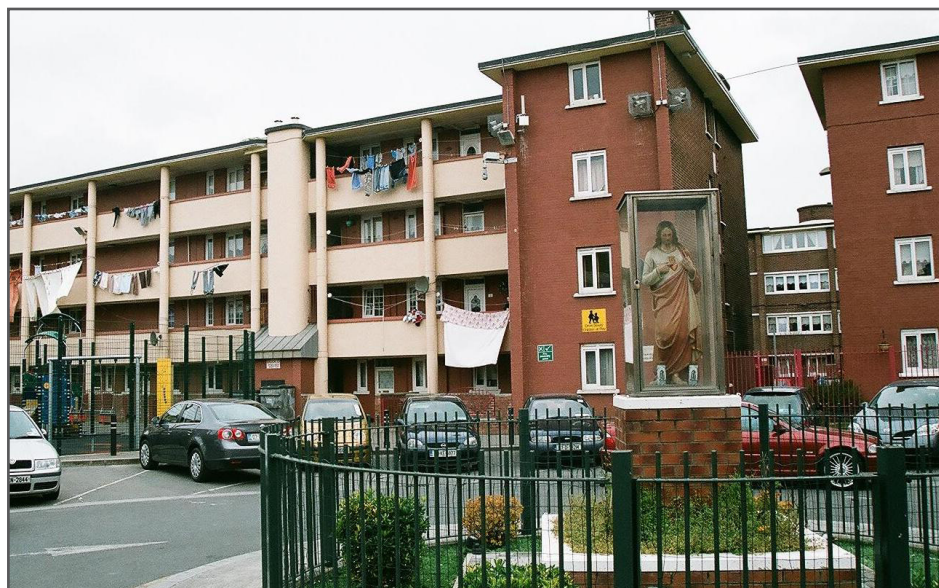


*Many families in inner-city Dublin embrace Catholic traditions, such as those living in this public housing complex. Some of these families now add a new element to their traditions: ICT literacy.*

community technology centers placed in the common areas of public housing projects across Dublin. Created and staffed by the Digital Community project, the aim of the telecenters was to boost the self-esteem of the local communities, while also providing much-needed skills for participants to succeed in the 21st Century. These initial community telecenters have grown into 23 across Dublin, as well as another four in Belfast. The centers offer public access computing, as well as a variety of e-skills courses and certifications based on Microsoft Unlimited Potential curriculum.



*Community development worker John Hogg says Irish sons used to follow their fathers into manual labor, and now the fathers follow their sons into ICT.*

## A Second Look at Adult Education

The Digital Community project serves many aspects of urban Irish life, seeking to narrow the digital divide by targeting everyone from schoolchildren to eighty-year-old seniors checking their RyanAir tickets online. The importance of ICT to personal psychological development – as well as employability – is evident across the spectrum of trainees, but it has a special effect for some beneficiaries, according to center managers and trainers interviewed in Dublin. One key demographic for the ICT programs is fathers and sons. As the traditional breadwinners in the family, Irish fathers are deeply burdened by effects of unemployment and underemployment. Through exposure to the demands and possibilities of e-skills, they begin to see new ways to live – outside the cycles of manual labor. As their kids learn about computing at the Disadvantaged Status Schools, the children bring home the knowledge to their families. Slowly, "dads are exposed to the computers through their kids, and then they start to come to the classes," says trainer Brendan Wicks.

John Hogg explains the pattern of ICT awareness that has emerged over the last few years in the neighborhood: "The fathers around here would be mainly in the laboring trades. They would have gotten interested in computers through their children having access to computers, and maybe getting a computer for Christmas. And then come run on down [to the public housing telecenters] and they would be accessing the computers as well, and doing some computer courses."

*These guys start to eye the office computers at their factories "and they think: 'I'm sitting on a forklift now, but maybe another opportunity will come up.'"*

*ICT trainer Brendan Wicks, on the shift occurring as fathers watch computers diffuse in workplaces*

Fathers come for reasons greater than curiosity; they come from a growing sense of economic necessity. Many telecenter users are blue collar workers who realize they need new skills to compete in the modern workforce. During a recent interview, trainer Brendan Wicks and center manager John

Hogg spoke about the difficulties experienced by inner city kids and parents. Making ends meet in these disadvantaged communities is not easy, and word of mouth about the economic opportunities provided by the computer centers has begun to take hold. John provided the example of three working class Dubliners who started coming around, and enrolled in a basic e-skills course at his center. "These three guys came because their warehouse has computers now," he recalled, "and they needed to learn how to use these things for inventory and distribution."

Rather than follow the old pattern of sticking to their current job competencies, fathers are beginning to see the advantages of e-skills to increase their job security and their options – as well as options for their children. Day by day, the fathers in the housing projects hear about the computer courses. According to Brendan, these guys start to eye the office computers at their factories "and they think: 'I'm sitting on a forklift now, but maybe another opportunity will come up.'"

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>
> *John Hogg, on the importance of ICT skills on his job security*

In the multi-purpose room in his community center John Hogg explains the educational challenges of many fathers who consider taking his ICT training courses. "In and around the inner city here, many people who are in their fifties wouldn't have any college education, so they would have been in the lower paying jobs." When asked for a particular example of someone in that demographic, someone who needed re-skilling and got it through ICT courses, John smiled and says: "Yeah, me."

John explained that e-skills are a key component of his job as a community development worker with the Dublin City Council, and without them "I would have been dependent on somebody else to do my work, and that would have been very, very awkward." John conceded that "awkward" means less job security: "yeah, that's true, yeah. I would be putting pressure on somebody else to carry part of my work."

## Hard Times, New Directions

In tough economic transitions, stronger self-reliance becomes increasingly important for Ireland's workers. Several factors converge to lead these Irishmen into ICT training courses: the changes in their children's educations, the awareness of the courses taking place inside their housing complexes, and the cold reality of economic restructuring. Peter Byrne, the director of the Digital Community project, described one of the motivations behind his project supporting the four telecenters in Northern Ireland: "38,000 men were laid off at the shipyards in Belfast when Tony Blair withdrew the state subsidies. It was a tough crowd of Loyalists" he said, referring to the majority Protestant population in the north, "and they needed a new identity."

> *The Belfast telecenters even played an active role in the...Good Friday Agreement disarmament campaign. Peter recalled a banner hanging over the telecenter manager's desk in the IRA-populated Short Strand enclave that read: "Bytes for Bullets." Users traded arms for computer time.*

The computer trainings created an opportunity for many men in the north, Peter says, not only to explore a new route to look for work, but also to develop a new sense of self-worth. With the Good Friday Agreement bringing a fragile end to "the troubles" in Northern Ireland, the

thousands of unemployed dockworkers experienced a social and economic shock on many levels.  The end of the armed conflict, and the accompanying sense of betrayal by London (for the removal of the shipyard subsidies), left many Protestant men shaken in their identification as Loyalists.  Moreover, the end of their careers as shipyard workers dealt a further blow to their pride as breadwinners.  For some the void was addressed by their immersion in ICT, and the sense that they could reinvent themselves as newly skilled workers in a new economy.  The Belfast telecenters even played an active role in the Catholic Unionist areas there, with one center located in the "Short Strand" Catholic enclave participating in the Good Friday Agreement disarmament



*The Irish Sea, just north of Dublin.  For many of those in the inner-city, the promise of Ireland's economic renaissance is still out of reach.  But slowly, the generations of manual labor are giving way to new economic opportunities on the Emerald Isle.*

campaign.  Peter recalled a banner hanging over the telecenter manager's desk in the IRA-populated Short Strand enclave that read:  "Bytes for Bullets."  Users traded arms for computer time.

Change in Dublin, and in the north, won't come over night, the trainers and center managers emphasize.  But the foundation has been laid for broad impact.  With every disadvantaged school in Dublin now covered, and two dozen telecenters in full swing, the fathers and sons aren't the only ones seeing new ways to learn and to labor.  Trainer Brendan Wicks adds that Dublin's mothers and daughters are using the ICT courses to break from unemployment and find new professions.  An increasing trend among the unemployed is to spend their state-supported re-training monies on ICT education.  Brendan highlights one woman who used her state unemployment funds to take his e-skills course, and who now works at a financial firm as a receptionist.  Brendan explains:  "When she went on to her new job she just started out there on a kind of a part-time basis, and now she's actually gone forward and is full-time."  Would you say that the ICT training had an impact on that process?  "Of course, yeah.  Of course."

## 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.