

“Lifers,” Computers and Kids

Community building and technology education in
Tacoma’s Al Davies Boys and Girls Club

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Evidence Narratives at the Center for Information & Society

The ICTD field is filled with individual success stories extolling the benefits of ICT access and fluency. These stories are often highly influential because they are rhetorically powerful, memorable narratives that create lasting frames to contextualize and interpret other data. Unfortunately, they are often driven by the demands of public relations as opposed to rigorous analysis.

When the goal is to share the story of a super star and tug heart strings, important details can be omitted. To understand how ICT programs work for *typical* trainees, to spread narratives that illuminate deeper dynamics and to amplify broadly useful lessons, stories should be researched and constructed with intention and rigor.

CIS is developing a methodology and story series that attempts to tap the rhetorical and qualitative explanatory power of detailed, contextualized, and personalized ICT case studies. While tension may sometimes exist between an organization’s desire to feature certain cases and the critical researcher’s commitment to rigor, a methodology built on intensive questioning and storytelling rich in the right details can uncover and communicate evidence of successful programs.

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. Properly constructed, evidence-based stories can serve 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.

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Boys and Girls Clubs of America (BGCA) are surprisingly similar. The federation has captured the benefits of scale while nurturing what’s most innovative and personal about local control. They are fundamentally community based, made up of more than 3,000 independently operated clubs nationwide. And yet, clubs in Tacoma, Washington and Boston, Massachusetts share uncanny similarities. They share a sense of community. The ability to balance a cohesive national identity and scalable program support with local discretion is notable for donors and organizations seeking to replicate the impact of BGCA. It is a remarkable springboard for reaching youth; it is proving especially effective for technology access and training.

Echo Curry offers insight—insight into the link between computer literacy and education, the way BGCA’s mission tethers technology to the holistic well being of children, and the mutually reinforcing, virtuous cycle driven by a legacy of successful programs and BGCA’s community ethic.

Echo is the technology director at Tacoma’s Al Davies Boys & Girls Club. Like many BGCA staff members across the country, Echo began as a club member. “I started at South End,” in Tacoma. “I did every program. Torch Club. I was Youth of the Year. I did what most teens did. I was getting older, a little bored with school, and I got interested in my friends and other activities, so I left. But eventually I came back and started volunteering.” And after graduating from the University of Washington, and recognizing the prominent role that technology was playing in Boys and Girls Clubs, she returned to the South Puget Sound system and was formally hired.

Technology, education and the well being of kids

Although Echo’s father was a maintenance man who “really pushed the technology angle” at home,



Echo and a student that won an MP3 player for winning a club digital arts competition. Echo solicits donations from community members for technology related prizes that spark and sustain student interest.

it wasn't until she attended the University of Washington that she got serious. “UW forced me to get online because the classes and teachers required it. To register for classes you need to be online, or you'd be pressing stars on the phone for the dial-up registration system, getting busy signals and not getting into the classes you want. Everything about UW relies on knowing technology, so I learned fast.”

Other college experiences also shaped Echo's interest in education and technology. “I was involved with the Office of Minority Affairs—I did a lot of mentoring and tutoring at High Schools. I worked with new freshmen. College is a new world and I wanted to help in that way.” She also worked with a non-profit off campus that provided technology curriculum to schools. Her understanding of the connection between computers, education and the economic and social well being of kids grew.

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Echo, on BGCA Internet access and training

She is emphatic about the importance of introducing children to technology in a supportive and safe way. “Technology is everything. From the can opener, to the TV, to social networking. It is a critical part of everyday life. People all around [club members] are using computers and the Internet. Without access at home, how will they learn? Where will they go? It is vital that they feel confident, like they know what the Internet is about and what they can do with it. If they aren't comfortable, they will fall behind. The kids are using it, so they need to know how to be safe. They need to be able to find the things they're looking for. They need to be able to judge what is credible. They need to have fun. It's really important.”



Club Tech and BGCA's platform of national resources is an important baseline that allows individual instructors to adapt their lessons based on the skill levels and interests of their students.

BGCA technology for education

The more important technology is in the lives of children, the more important it is to get the approach right. Boys and Girls Clubs, because of their unique ability to maintain core values amidst a sprawling national network, are well positioned to provide technology access and training to kids that need it most. Their commitment to the holistic well being of the child makes BGCA technology programs more likely to emphasize instrumental values. Computers support learning and socialization; they are not valuable in and of themselves.

Clubs are highly attentive to the specific needs of their members. Staff members

uniformly emphasize the voluntary, program-based nature of their organizations. According to one club director: "The kids do not have to be here. We are not a day care. If the programs don't capture their attention, we cannot force them to stay. This puts pressure on us to engage them, but it also gives us leverage if they're not behaving. 'Hey you're going to have to leave if you don't act right!' They take it seriously and so do we."

"We're not using the tools to teach them to use the computer per se, we're teaching them to use the computer to be educated."

Echo, on the utility of computers

The way that Echo approaches and adapts her lessons is instructive. She pulls a thick folder from one of five plastic tubs filled with lesson plans and student progress charts. She explains a lesson for Black History Month for 10-12 year olds. "We start with persuasion maps. What are the arguments you want to make? What evidence supports those arguments? How do we find the evidence? How do we find our sources? Do you just pull them off the web?

Do we just copy them off someone else's site and paste them into our site? No, we don't. I focus on brainstorming and the planning exercises that happen before 'technology skills' come into play."

Technology supports broader educational goals. Echo offers more detail, "We find resources on Martin Luther King Jr. online. We find timelines. We watch his videos. We're not using the tools to teach them to use the computer per se, we're teaching them to use the computer to be educated. There's so much information out there. There are so many materials. We're using the computer to educate ourselves. That's the connection to technology."

Baseline Resources, Discretion and Digital Arts

Through a grant from Microsoft, clubs have access to a suite of baseline curricular resources. The wide-ranging body of lessons and exercises provides a platform on top of which individual trainers adapt and innovate. "Club tech and the digital arts curriculum are excellent," says Echo. "I use some of the lessons exactly as they are. For others, I borrow pieces. I really try to make it relevant for the kids in the class." Adaptation is standard procedure. Because the bases are covered, technology directors can spend more time on lessons that students need and demand most. Local clubs have discretion to borrow as needed, keeping their kids at the center of curricular decisions. "I don't know what I'd do if I had to write all these lessons from scratch," reports one technology director.

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Echo, on BGCA technology competitions

Competition, a birthright of clubs that grew out of athletic leagues, is also positively shaping technology education. BGCA's national digital arts festival, which gains credibility and interest because Microsoft sponsors it, has been replicated on a smaller scale by clubs and systems around the country. It has become a powerful unifying and motivating force. "They love the digital arts competition. They have made movies, Photoshopped pictures and built web sites. The competition is a rallying point. We kind of became a team," reports Echo. "Borrowing the digital camera is a great way to keep them

interested,” said another technology director. And multimedia, such as movie making and audio engineering, are increasingly seen as effective ways to attract older kids, including elusive teens that break away from the clubs. “We need to be better at getting them in here,” Echo points out,” because if they’re not here, they’re on the streets.”



Echo and the Al Davies students show off certificates they earned for completing a digital photography program. Photography, multimedia and other digital arts are popular activities, especially with older kids.

Small prizes, such as candy or cash, are common incentives that boost interest. Echo sometimes goes further: “We gave out MP3 players, DVD players and flash drives that I get from private donors. I like to give technology related prizes. I spend a lot of my time soliciting private donations. We also just got a grant for a digital camera, a scanner and Photoshop 6—which is difficult but I have a friend that is a photographer that comes in as a volunteer. He worked with them for a week, but I need more training. He was also a great resource because he’s DOING it. He is a role model showing them that there is a use for these skills down the road, out of school.”

Moving on, at some point

Echo is a lifer. It is not unexpected that she now teaches at Al Davies. Countless members across the country forge close relationships with mentors and return as volunteers and employees because “they want to give back.” Boys and Girls Clubs have developed a mechanism, a farm system, which nurtures the next wave of leaders while attending to the core mission. It is a virtuous cycle that addresses challenges, such as staff turnover and mission drift, that plague similar social service agencies. The better they serve kids and build community, the more likely kids are to give back as adults.

Relationships are fundamental to BGCA, binding the network, drawing alumni back and ultimately serving kids. Echo explains: “Mentorships are very important. It’s about developing relationships. I grew up in a Boys and Girls Club and that’s why I’m here now. We deal with whatever they have going on in their lives. Some of these kids are here all day. Their parents drop them off at 7 in the morning. They go to school, and then come back. Their parents pick them up at 7 at night. We are their second and third parents. We help where

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Echo, on the BGCA community

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Technology is a critical component in the lives of these children. And the thriving BGCA community ethic is especially important to attract and retain skilled technology trainers. Often, strong technology skills draw nonprofit employees into the private sector, accentuating staff turnover challenges around technology. In Boys and Girls Clubs, workers stay longer than economists might predict because of the community. “I will move on at some point. It’s not enough money for a family. And I have other goals and dreams that are important to me,” Echo offers. “My Dad says I need to put these technology skills to use and go work for Microsoft. I may. But for now I like working with people—the kids and the community. I’m passionate about education.”

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