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Yesler Terrace

Abstract
Yesler Terrace Computer Lab provides computer and Internet access to residents at the
Yesler Terrace low-income housing development in Seattle, Washington. Technology
and ESL classes are held at the center in the mornings, whereas a public open lab is
operated in the afternoons. Users span across all age groups, from pre-school children to
senior citizens, and come from a variety of ethnic backgrounds, including a large
percentage of immigrants. Users come to the lab to carry out such tasks as learning
English and basic computer skills, completing work projects and online job applications,
doing homework, playing games, and communicating with others online. Benefits were
felt on the individual, family, and community level as users improve job and educational
prospects, communicate better between family and friends, increase bonds within
families. The organization has become a catalyst for increased community collaboration,
and also provides a safe place for teenagers and children, thus increasing individual and
community safety.

Background - Yesler Terrace
Yesler Terrace is the oldest public housing development in Washington State, built in
1939, and administered by the Seattle Housing Authority (SHA) since 2005. According
to the SHA Web site, the organization's mission is to "enhance the Seattle community by
creating and sustaining decent, safe and affordable living environments that foster
stability and self-sufficiency for people with low incomes." Today, Yesler Terrace houses
approximately 1500 ethnically diverse residents in 561 apartments.

The Yesler Terrace development includes an on site community center that is
centrally located on Yesler Way so that all residents have easy access. The Yesler
Terrace Community Center includes a computer lab, teen center, fitness room,
gymnasium and basketball court, multipurpose room, childcare center, and a commons
area. There are no closed-off areas, with the exception of the fitness room, which has
limited hours, and the multipurpose room, which is locked at times as it can be rented for
private events. The community center is open Monday through Friday until 9 p.m., and is
part of the Seattle Parks and Recreation Department, which operates 28 such community
centers in the city. The community center was remodeled in 2005 and is a bright and
welcoming space.

The computer lab was established in 2000 with the help of funding from Seattle
Public Libraries. It is located near the front entrance on Yesler Way. The lab houses 18
computers, all of which have high speed Internet access. In the mornings, the lab holds an
array of classes that reach out to the diverse resident population, for example ESL
classes, computer basics, senior classes, teen multimedia classes, homework tutoring, and
a program for children ages 3-5 who participate in the Head Start program situated
nearby. From September through June, six to eight classes are held at the center for adults
and seniors each month. In the afternoons, an open lab is operated, whereby individuals

can sign up to use a computer for a one-hour time slot. Once the hour has passed, that person can continue to use the computer if there is no one else waiting.

The lab also includes a staff workstation, with two chairs nearby for users to wait for a machine to open up, or to sit and talk to the staff member on duty. The director of the computer lab works with organizations such as Harborview Neighborhood House and Seattle Public Housing to raise funds for its operations.

The lab itself was painted a light blue-grey color. There were two windows partially covered with dark blue mini-blinds, possibly to shield the room from the glare of sunlight. There were rolling office chairs for those using the computers and some of the younger users could be seen scooting around in them. The younger users also interacted with the staff member on duty and with each other much more than the adult users that we observed. The center is also often the only place that residents can get access to computers and the Internet free of charge.

Data Collection

Researchers made three visits to the community technology center, holding one-on-one interviews with three members of staff and two adult users, along with two youth focus groups. The first staff interview was held with the director of the technology center, who had occupied the directorship for seven years. A UW dental student was doing community observation with the director that day, and we agreed that she could sit in. The second staff interview was held with Omar, who had been using the computer lab at the community center since he was 11 years old, and is now hired on staff to supervise the computer lab. The third staff interview was held with Lisa, a recreation leader at the teen center. Lisa had worked with other community centers in the city before coming to Yesler Terrace four months prior to our visit. Lisa acts as a mentor to the teenage population at Yesler, organizes teen and family events, and interfaces with other community centers to collaborate on projects and events. The adult users that were interviewed will be called Joe and Sandra for the purposes of this study.

Staff Interviews

When asked who uses the center, the director responded that youth, senior citizens, immigrants, and low-income residents all use the lab. He also mentioned that the lab is open to anyone, whether they live in the development or not. Omar pointed out that the majority of users were young people, particularly between the ages of seven to fourteen, and that most of these users come in every day.

The staff highlighted that the technology center was important to users because it is a multipurpose center that addresses the needs of the whole Yesler community, a place for residents to come and do activities such as homework, use the Internet, play games, take computer classes and ESL classes, and complete online job applications. The director told us of how he had, just the day before, helped a person to apply for a food handler permit in Burien. The route to the testing center was long and complicated, and the person needed help finding out which buses to take. The director helped him for an hour at the technology lab, and the individual made it to his destination and passed the test. Staff also pointed out that the center is important to users as a safe place that is always open and welcoming.

When asked what information users most often seek, the staff all felt that it depended on the age group of the user. The younger users tended to use the computers to do homework and online research, play games, communicate with friends on social networking sites, and download music. Middle-aged adults wanted to improve life skills, their housing situation, and job prospects. Senior users came to communicate with friends and family, to send and receive pictures of their children and grandchildren, and to use Web sites such as eBay and Craiglist.

Staff told us that users receive a multitude of individual benefits from using the center. For example, they are able to communicate more frequently with friends and family through emails. The director spoke about the educational benefits of coming to the center. Youth can do their homework at the computer lab, and as Omar pointed out, this often leads to better grades in school. Representatives from the technology center have also helped prepare middle school children to get through high school, and helped teens to apply for and succeed in college. Adults can improve their English and technology skills at the center, and research and apply for jobs online. Users often come to the center to work on resumes and fill out online employment applications, which has led to them securing jobs. Lisa also pointed out that the technology and teen centers at Yesler keep teenagers safe and healthy, by keeping them off the streets and away from trouble.

Staff also felt that the Yesler community technology center benefited the families of users. For example, parents can be sure that their children are safe when they are at the center as they are monitored by staff. The director explained, "I have a good relationship with parents. Kids come here from school. Their parents come to see them and pick them up so I work with the parents and interact with them. If I see a problem, I discuss it with them. I know the kids for four plus years. Parents are also taking classes. I talk directly with the kids and have a good relationship with the parents." Omar spoke about how the lab can bring families closer together, stating, "I've seen family members use the computer lab. Mom and daughter are spending time in the computer lab so it is together time even if they are working on their own."

The community also benefits from Yesler technology center. The director spoke about how he interacts with other organizations in the community to work together to build the greater community. He explained that the Yesler technology center recommends clients to other community organizations, and vice versa. For example, if people need help with housing issues, the staff at Yesler will help them as much as possible and then send them to organizations such as Neighborhood House or Seattle Housing if they need further resources. In return, Job Connections and Seattle Housing refer people to the computer lab to learn how to build a resume or to take a class on finding a job.

Although the center has been a huge success, there are also challenges. Staff highlighted limited resources, operation hours, and staff as difficulties that the center comes up against. When asked what challenges users face when using the center, all three staff members suggested that the language barriers for non-English speaking users were significant. Lisa stated, "If everything is in English and I don't read English that would be very challenging. It would help to have programs from other languages. Immigrants can be some of the smartest people in their homeland. If you don't understand the language, it can be so frustrating. Once that barrier is down, they learn and we can learn from their culture and that is beautiful." The director also mentioned that senior users

face a mobility challenge, and that the center does not currently have enough resources to optimally reach disabled users.

The staff felt that funding for staffing, increased opening hours, and more computers and software could greatly improve the center. In relation to the challenges posed by serving a large immigrant population, the director suggested that it would be beneficial to have more translators at hand for ESL and technology classes, and to have software for immigrant languages. Lisa felt that it would be worthwhile to tailor some ESL classes to the community, giving the examples of Vietnamese and Eritrean. It was also suggested that it would be nice to offer tutoring services to help school-aged children with their homework, and to offer more advanced work force technology classes for adults. Staff also expressed a desire to develop more inter-maturational programming, for example teens teaching adults and younger children about new media and technology, and adults tutoring teens on professional skills and practice. Staff felt that all of this could happen with more financial and material resources.

Significantly, two of the staff indicated that they find the process of evaluating the services provided at the technology center challenging. Lisa stated, "We have a hard time evaluating ourselves. Most funders say we are wonderful but we don't really know." The director felt that they needed help from experts in order to know how to make these things happen.

Interviews-Users

Joe, one of the adult users that was interviewed, stated that he had been using the computer lab at Yesler Terrace for approximately three years, and Sandra, the second adult interviewee, stated that she had been using the lab for four years. Many of the youth in the focus groups could not recall when they started using the technology lab, though a significant portion had used the lab in the old community center, and continued to use the new lab when it opened in 2005.

Most of the focus group participants stated that they had Internet access at home, but still enjoyed using the technology center. One teen informed us that he liked to come to the lab because of the faster Internet connection, exclaiming that the dial-up system at home "takes like an hour to connect!" Joe and Sandra both mentioned that they do not feel the need to update their home computers and Internet connections because they can use the resources at the conveniently located Yesler lab for free. Joe explained that he is currently in a financial rut and has "no source of income for a while," therefore no means of buying a new computer and the software that he needs. Sandra also spoke of having limited financial resources, which makes her dependent on the services offered by the Yesler Community Center, in particular the computer lab.

When researchers asked users how much time they spend at the technology center, they got a wide array of answers. In the focus group, one participant stated that he spends only fifteen minutes a day in the lab during the summer but more time during the academic year, whereas another participant responded that he used the lab for an hour on most days. The female teens appeared to be more interested in using the computer center during the summer, whereas the males were less interested. Sandra stated that she did not use the center as much as she would like because there are fewer morning hours available and because she feels the younger users are too rowdy and disruptive. Joe, on the other

hand, uses the computer lab at least three days per week, spending between 16-20 hours there per week.

Both focus groups said that they were initially drawn to the technology lab to play online games. The main draw for Joe was Photoshop. He was also attracted by the fact that users can print up to five pages per day for free and that the lab has the technology to burn CDs. Sandra writes articles for a local paper, and likes to be able to use the technology at the center for formatting and editing.

Users were asked to assess why the technology center was important to them, and gave varied answers. Some participants in the focus groups found that the CTC was important to them for doing homework, whereas others found they could concentrate better at home. Some indicated that the lab was important for social networking, while others were frustrated at the number of users who appeared to be at the lab solely for entertainment purposes, naming MySpace in particular. Two of the respondents stated that they did not particularly care about the computer lab. For Joe, the computer lab is very important as the primary location where he does all of his work.

None of the respondents in the first youth focus group had taken advantage of the courses available for youth and teenage users of the computer lab. Two individuals in the second focus group stated that they participated in the 3-D computer animation class that was offered. Joe and Sandra both felt that the adult computer classes were too basic for their needs, but Joe has attended the 3-D animation class.

Although many of the users interviewed had not availed of the classes at the technology center, they did feel that they had learned much at the center. One focus group respondent stated that she needed to use PowerPoint for a school project and the computer lab supervisor/director taught her and some others how to use the program. Joe was able to put together a demo reel of his multi-media work utilizing some of the skills he learned in the 3-D animation class. He was proud of the fact that he was able to save so much money by using the resources that were available to him at little or no cost: "If you have time to put in, you can get a lot of value." Sandra stated that she has learned how to cut and paste images within documents, and also learned how to attach documents to an email.

Users mentioned a number of ways that families had benefited from the technology center. Most of the respondents in the focus groups agreed that people in their families have benefited from the lab, and spoke of how other family members availed of its services. One participant stated that his sisters were in the lab "all the time! That's why I can't ever use it because they are always in there!" Joe has no family in the area but he has had neighbors and friends in the creative community who have benefited greatly from this computer lab. Sandra does not have any family in the state.

Users were asked to pinpoint the difficulties encountered when using the center. Youth participants stated that wait times for computers sometimes got in the way of them using the lab, and many also felt that the Internet connection was too slow. Joe felt that the hours were too limited. Both Sandra and Joe pointed out that the younger users can be disruptive and disrespectful of others' space, making them feel uncomfortable and interfering with their work.

When asked whether there was anything they wanted to do at the technology center but could not, none of the respondents in the first youth focus group could think of anything. Respondents in the second focus group, however, expressed a great deal of

frustration with Internet filters that blocked Web sites for entertainment and social networking purposes, or other sites that held information required for school projects. This focus group also stated that there was some animosity towards the younger computer lab users from the adult users that made them feel uncomfortable when using the lab. Joe found it frustrating that there was no color printing available at the Yesler lab, a service that he can avail of at other technology centers in the area. He also talked about the lack of scanners and photocopiers, but acknowledged that these tools may not be needed by all users.

Respondents in both focus groups felt that having a faster Internet connection would improve the service offered by the technology lab. Some users in the first focus group felt that a minimum age requirement for using the computer lab would also improve the level of service. The suggested age was seven years old. Joe would like to see more advanced classes for adult users, or at least a greater array of software made available so users could play around with new programs on their own. He did acknowledge, however, that many people are weary of new technology, which could prevent them utilizing the software available. Sandra would like additional morning hours made available for general use as these are the best hours for her schedule. At the time of the interview, a lot of morning hours were reserved for classes. She also suggested that there be separate times for adult users and younger users.

All of the participants in the second youth focus group stated that they would still use the computer lab as is. One user stated that he could "live with it but it gets annoying," 'it' meaning the Internet speed. Only one participant in the first focus group responded to the question of whether they would continue to use the technology center, stating "If there was no MySpace I wouldn't use it." Joe said that he would continue to use the computer lab as long as he is in his current financial bind. Sandra stated that she would continue to use the lab, especially since she has an article due soon for a local newspaper.