

Skyping with Seniors: An Academic, Professional, and Community Collaboration between China and the US

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Introduction & Method

This report briefly describes a collaboration and discusses results and implications of a Skype experiment conducted with seniors at the Clark Lindsey Retirement Village in Urbana, Illinois, and volunteers with the Senior Self-Help Cooperative in Beijing in March 2011. The project was part of ongoing collaboration between the Community Informatics Research Lab at the University of Illinois at Urbana Champaign, faculty at Dominican University and Nankai University, and two local organizations who were already using technology. Our first research product was a quantitative comparison of our two countries' national internet surveys (Williams & Yan, 2009); all three authors later presented research in two conferences in Beijing (at COINFO 2010 and at Peking University). With one of us (Kok) a social work scholar focusing on older adults, and all of us interested in how to overcome digital inequality, the Skype event was envisioned and embraced during a discussion at the Beijing cooperative. Thanks are due to Dr. Abdul Alkalimat (also of U of Illinois and the Community Informatics Research Lab) for proposing the idea as we talked with the Senior Self-Help Cooperative.

After returning to the US and continuing planning with staff and volunteers at Clark Lindsey and the Senior Self Help Cooperative, a one-off cultural exchange on music, culture, and health took shape. The 60 minute program included introductions by both sides, song and dance by all the seniors in the US, folk songs by seniors in China, songs by the a senior choral group in the US, a Tai Chi demonstration by seniors in China, and finally a question and answer session involving both Chinese and American seniors. A trial session assessed the sound quality and the logistics of the setup involved the activity directors of the two senior organizations, the researcher in China, and interpreters from the university. Follow up included a photo essay written immediately by the China organization's staff and a morning-after focus group in the US. The larger research program that links the three authors entails questions about how local communities can enter into the information society and thrive. There were three research goals: a) to determine the logistics and issues with enabling a successful Skype setup; b) to assess the short term impact of one session on Skype on seniors' perception of and use of technology and c) to assess other unintended impacts. The research method used here was primarily involved observation, focus group, a short questionnaire administered after the focus group, and using the photo essay as field report.

Results & Implications

There were two major sets of logistics issues that needed to be considered – before and during the Skype session. One of the issues that needed to be addressed prior to the Skyping related to the appropriate time to have the session given the constraints of programming and time difference. The other related to the concerted communication effort by researchers to involve the Chinese administrators to develop a program that suited the likes of both parties. The logistics issues that researchers need to consider include the technical setup of the audio visual elements which related to screen projection, lighting, sound and picture quality, size of the screen to enhance the interconnectedness among participants. The element of turn taking between parties for communication needed to be established prior to the start of the program and co-ordinated by a host from each of the participating parties. Eye contact with among participants was crucial. The other logistics issue that was crucial was the support provided by effective translators on both sides.

The session was enthusiastically attended by more than 80 seniors at Clark Lindsey and 14 at the Senior Self Help Cooperative. In Illinois, they were amazed that they were able to interact with persons from China – a country whose culture, customs, history, and people interested

people very much. The positive experience led many Clark Lindsey seniors to reminisce about their travel experiences to China years. Many had specific questions about Chinese family dynamics, one-child policy, and retirement ages and how the rapid growth and modernization had changed China and its people. Many mentioned the interactions that they had with specific seniors on the China side during the question and answer session. The participants in the focus group were overwhelmingly very positive about their experiences and were interested in future Skype sessions involving other cultures as well as more with China. They wanted smaller group discussions, repeat events, so as to form relationships with seniors in China. The technology, amazing at first, became invisible and “normal” as the event unfolded, even though it was a first for most. The focus group conversation emphasized cultural exchange and personal connection and almost excluded technological questions! On the China side, seniors had largely less contact with information technology and were likewise highly engaged by the experience with Americans, spontaneously taking full ownership of the session and technology (mic, camera) as soon as they saw how the skype chat worked. At the end, the much larger American group did likewise, with an impromptu goodbye queue forming so that each person stopped at the webcam to wave and say a personal hello and goodbye.

Implications

First, this experiment being entirely unfunded demonstrates that a lot can be done on a shoestring. Technology was volunteered and improvised on both ends and worked perfectly.

Second, it is easy to be surprised by cultural differences. Not until the session began did we see that senior means many things around the world. Residents of Clark Lindsey are in their 80s; volunteers with the Senior Self-Help Cooperatives are in their 50s and 60s. Although everyone actively bridged this without hesitation, it was in effect a generation gap on top of the cultural and language gap. Retirement age in China was 50 until recently and is now 55; in the US it is 65 and going up. The cooperative organizes younger old people to help older old people in China who typically live at home, not in senior housing like Clark Lindsey.

Third, we affirmed that learning technology is a breeze when the lesson involves something that people love and want to do—with other people if at all possible. The informatics moments that we have reported on elsewhere (Williams 2012) are moments when people seek help with a task they want and need to accomplish using technology. The technology is subordinated to the task, or the lesson falters. For example, bridging the digital divide by learning the mouse with a game of Solitaire works better (for Solitaire players) than any explanation or demonstration.

Most importantly for this short report, we affirmed that communities considered digitally divided—seniors in both our countries, particularly of middle to lower income in China—navigate the digital age with enthusiasm and skill. To bridge more digital divides, we must continue to rely on the creativity of communities that others may overlook. Building and sustaining long-distance research communities such as we are doing will also help social science avoid being captive to any one culture or country, and this is part of the mission of the *Journal of Community Informatics*.

Works cited

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