EADTU: Health Care & Social Work
Local Nets and Social Capital

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Abstract

It has been a common theme in the literature of social science that changes in urban industrial society have undermined the local community and led to a reduction in social capital. Debates in the health and welfare professions point to the importance of the community context in many social problems and suggest that a rediscovery of community is required. Developments in communications and information technologies (C&IT) have been hailed both as providing the basis for a renewal of community and as a new threat to its existence. Particular interest attaches to the use of local nets, locally-based community networks, which have been presented as having considerable potential for changing the way in which social capital is created and maintained, especially in marginal areas.

The question is whether the use of local nets can (re-)create social capital in local communities. Can participation online lead to more participation in the community or to further fragmentation and isolation? Can local nets provide a foundation for the growth of trust and a sense of belonging? What role can online learning communities play in helping to bridge barriers between local communities and the rest of society?

In this paper we report the early stages of a research project that is concerned with the impact of local nets and online learning communities in two marginalised communities, one in Sweden (Stockholm), the other in Scotland (Glasgow). Local nets aim to increase social capital, especially with reference to disadvantaged groups such as single parents, immigrants and low-income families, but by encouraging cohesion within the local community may inhibit the growth of wider social cohesion. The development of learning communities, based on online collaboration in the production of community portraits, is presented as a potential way of bridging the gap between groups. Initial analysis of a survey administrated in one of the communities involved suggests a relatively low level of social capital, but a high degree of optimism about the potential impact of the local net and considerable enthusiasm for online collaboration.