

**Workshops with clients of St Mungo's Charity for Homeless People,
Spring 2010**

Developed by Furtherfield.org in partnership with Access Space and St Mungo's charity for Homeless People. Funded by the Transformation Fund and Arts Council of England


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Introduction

Zero Dollar Laptop workshops kicked off at Bridge Resource Centre in West London in January 2010 with clients of St Mungo's Charity for Homeless People.

Participants worked to recycle donated laptops and install Free and Open Source Software (FOSS) to build functioning media laptops. In a series of twelve technical and creative workshops they learned to work with office software, create sound, graphics and video to customise their own computers, to blog and share their work via the Internet.

At the end of the project everyone who had attended all the sessions left with their own Internet enabled laptop and the knowledge about how to maintain and upgrade it for free (or where to find the online support they need when they need it).

This report is jointly written by the team who devised and ran the project and sets it in the context of recent reports on 'digital inclusion'. It aims to capture the experience and learning of ALL involved in this first Zero Dollar Laptop workshop series- participants and organisers, to inform future development of the project.

About Zero Dollar Laptop

The Zero Dollar Laptop project aims to change the way we all think about technology.

"The emergence of the zero dollar laptop as a key computing platform for empowering individuals, stimulating creativity, overcoming poverty and enriching our shared culture is entirely feasible without any additional research, design, or manufacture." The Zero Dollar Laptop Manifesto¹

According to the UK government's document Delivering Digital Inclusion - An Action Plan For Consultation (2008)² 15% of the UK population (6 million adults) are both digitally and socially excluded. It says that "analysis of those who are missing out [on using computers and the internet] shows a strong correlation with those experiencing social disadvantage". It goes on to state that, "...where there is suitable access and support, these technologies are not only actively taken up by disadvantaged people but also help to address the complex issues behind their problems, from unemployment to poor health, homelessness to social isolation." The Digital Britain Report recognises the central role that digital culture and infrastructure have to play in the cultural, social and economic development of the UK and that access to broadband Internet fundamentally impacts how contemporary culture is created, accessed and experienced.

The Zero Dollar Laptop project develops creativity, technology skills and environmental awareness. It proposes to reuse the millions of redundant laptops currently gathering dust on shelves in homes and offices across Britain and to connect people to new knowledge networks in the process; in the case of this first series of workshops, to people who are best placed to make use of the laptops and benefit from a new set of technical, and media skills.

This work changes the way we think about technology by a shift emphasis; from high-status consumer technologies to customised tools-for-the-job and smart, connected users.

1 <http://robvankranenburgs.wordpress.com/2007/10/11/james-wallbank-says-the-zero-dollar-laptop-manifesto/>
2 <http://www.communities.gov.uk/publications/communities/deliveringdigitalinclusion/>

The Partners

Zero Dollar Laptop workshops were devised and run by two organisations working in partnership at the intersection of art technology and social change, Access Space and Furtherfield.org. The workshops are inspired by the Zero Dollar Laptop Manifesto³ written by James Wallbank of Access Space and are developed as part of the Furtherfield.org Media Arts Ecology Programme⁴.

Access Space in Sheffield is an arts and education charity and the UK's first free media lab: an open access learning community where participants learn, create and communicate online. They have successfully run open community based media labs using reused technology for many years now. <http://lowtech.org/intro/>

Furtherfield.org is a non-profit media arts organisation based in North London. They have also been running workshops and collaborative projects in community settings for many years. Through creative and critical engagement with art and technology participants are inspired and enabled to become active co-creators of their cultures and societies. <http://furtherfield.org>

St Mungo's Charity for Homeless People work to tackle the causes and consequences of homelessness and to equip people to realise their potential. These workshops were hosted and supported by St Mungo's staff at the Bridge Resource centre.



What Happened?

Acquiring Laptops

Zero Dollar Laptops are recycled/reused computer technology donated by the public or are purchased as low cost second hand computers. During the run up to the workshops a call was sent out for donations (the Netbehaviour email list, Furtherfield blog, Twitter, Facebook, local community forums, at Access Space, software forums, community forums). A specification of 1 GHz processor or higher with 256 Mb RAM and CD burner was suggested, although we had no idea what we would actually receive. We had a great response. The laptops were collected by Furtherfield.org in London, one arrived by post from Greece, three were brought from Access Space in Sheffield and later St. Mungos IT department also donated. As the participant group was much larger than originally anticipated, the remainder were purchased later from vendors on Ebay for approx £50 each.

3 <http://robvankranenburgs.wordpress.com/2007/10/11/james-wallbank-says-the-zero-dollar-laptop-manifesto/>

4 Furtherfield.org Media Arts Ecology Programme

Preparing Laptops

Preliminary troubleshooting was carried out with the laptops before the start of the workshops to ensure that participants should not experience demoralising set-backs with hardware failures in the early workshops. Each laptop needed to be installed with Ubuntu Linux to test for hardware problems, potential software problems and to gauge what each would be capable of in a workshops situation. The areas which needed to be looked at were: whether the bios was easily accessible/editable, the speed of the processors, the amount of RAM, the integrity of hard drive, ethernet connectivity, wireless internet capability, the CD ROM drive, the screen and the power supply. This work was carried out by workshop leader, Jake Harries.

Specifications of the laptop processors varied very widely e.g. from 500 MHz to 2.6 GHz processors, and testing of the first batch of ten took three days. Only one was too old to be of any use to the project.



Recruiting for workshops

Two taster sessions were arranged with St Mungo's, at the Bridge Training Centre and at the Endell Street site, where presentations were given by Jake Harries for potential workshop participants. The ideas behind the use of recycled/re-used technology and Free and Open Source Software and Zero Dollar's potential for creativity, were explained. Both sessions were well attended and St Mungo's recruited a number of other participants to make up numbers and in case anyone dropped out of future workshop sessions.

Running Workshops

Introductions

Initially the workshops were to have taken place on one afternoon a week for eight weeks. Due to the number of participants after the third week two workshops were programmed for the day, and later the workshop programme was extended a further four weeks. The number of participants was nearly double what workshop leaders were expecting.

From the beginning the workshop participants all got on well together and the atmosphere in all of the workshops has been excellent.

Main Stages of Learning

The Zero Dollar Laptop series of workshops cover a wide range of creative and technical activities with a computer. It is intended that a laptop user will acquire a set of skills which will empower them to have a greater understanding of the tools they are using than if they were simply to buy a computer.

Technical skills: installing an operating system, replacing RAM and a hard drive are usually carried out by shop staff and may need to be paid for. Workshop participants have learned to do it for themselves. It was obvious they actively enjoyed the challenge of installing a computer operating system for the first time!

Creative skills: the lesson plans were devised to allow for the maximum amount of hands-on creative learning using the available software. Workshop leaders were very pleased with how quickly the groups picked up the skills to manipulate digital images and edit photographs.

Participants grasped that the images/avatars they created need not simply be ends in themselves but could have destinations in the outside world on the internet where others could share them.

Planning & negotiating skills: this is something they learned with each other around the Press Room Project table. Negotiating ideas amongst themselves and with the workshop leaders as to how to best plan and execute the Press Room Project during the open day was very exciting. Participants discussed at length over two sessions how they would divide into teams, who they would interview and what questions to ask. At times discussion became quite lively.

Customisation, social media – going public: Key to the ZDLT project is the stage of customisation. Customisation is mainly about changing attitudes towards recycled technology. We create stencils, desktop backgrounds, stickers and avatars, in order to turn old laptops into useful and funky pieces of hardware. This is important for two reasons. First, participants make their laptop really theirs. Second, it gives Zero Dollar Laptops high personal value.

During the workshops, what was made was shared. Participants uploaded their stencils, pictures and designs to the ZDLT website to make it available to everyone. Furthermore, they created a Facebook group to exchange resources and opened blogs to publish their personal stories and interests.

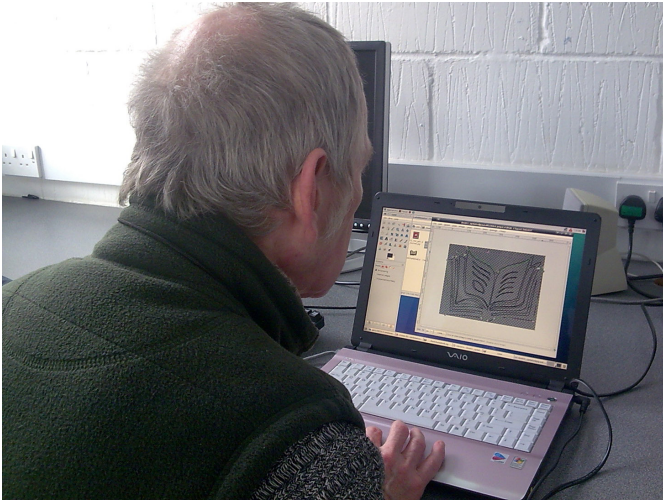
The Press Room Project, for instance, provided the perfect context to explore the real possibilities of social media. The participants were asked to form an editorial team to discuss about and report on the Open Day event at St Mungos. The first meeting soon turned into a lively discussion where participants raised important issues concerning the future of the centre and the repercussions of its closure on their situation. The key ideas of these conversations informed a series of articles that they published on the ZDLT blog. What was particularly exciting about this project was to see how technical skills allowed for social intervention. The experience made evident that what we teach has the potential to empower people to make their voices heard.

Handing Over the Laptops

During the tenth workshop, to make distribution fair, each laptop was numbered and participants were asked to close their eyes and pull a numbered ticket from a bag. When each has their laptop they are free to do whatever they like with it: this is where personal customisation of the laptops' exteriors begin!

Devising personal projects

There are so many different activities possible with a Zero Dollar Laptop it would be impossible to cover them all. For this reason in the later workshops projects were led by participants' interests, drawing on the things that had been learned in earlier lessons.



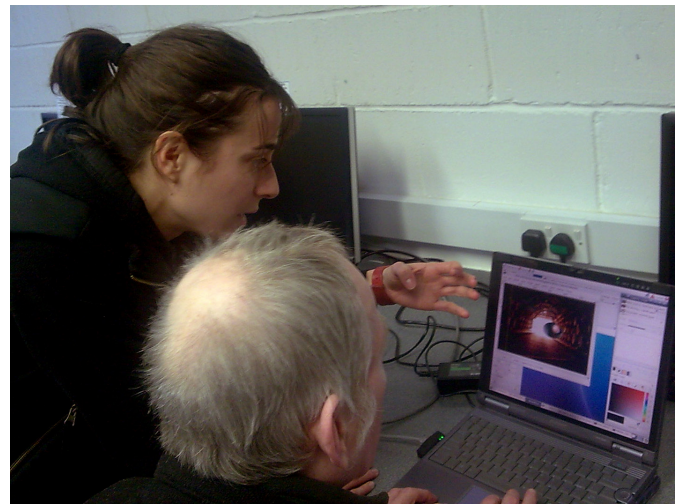
Gerry working on his stencil.



Editorial meeting in preparation for the open Day Event.



Jake introducing the participants to Linux



Olga helping Jerry create his avatar with GIMP.

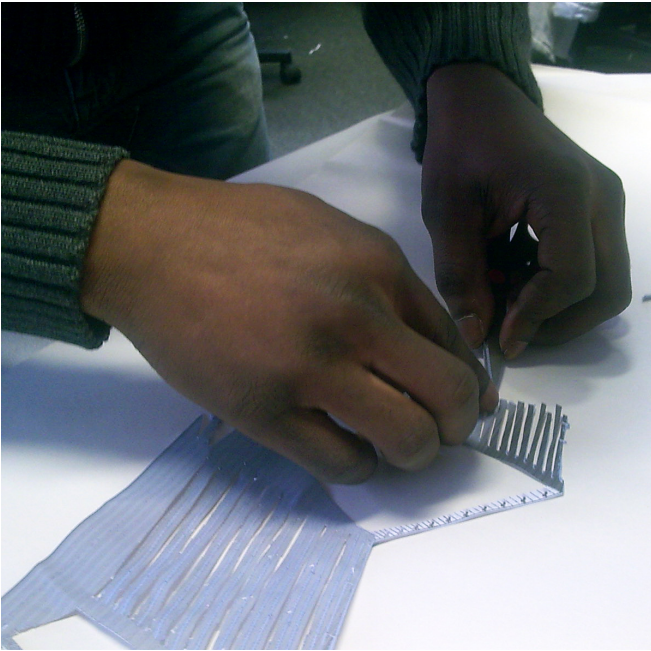
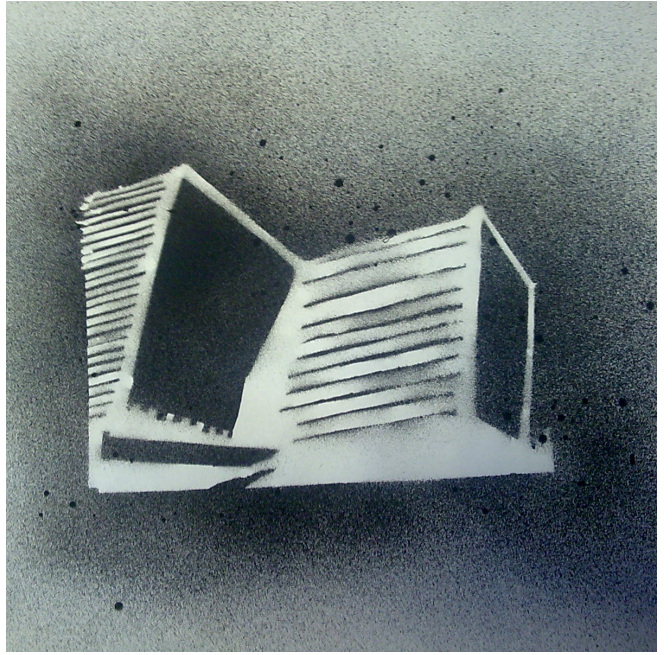
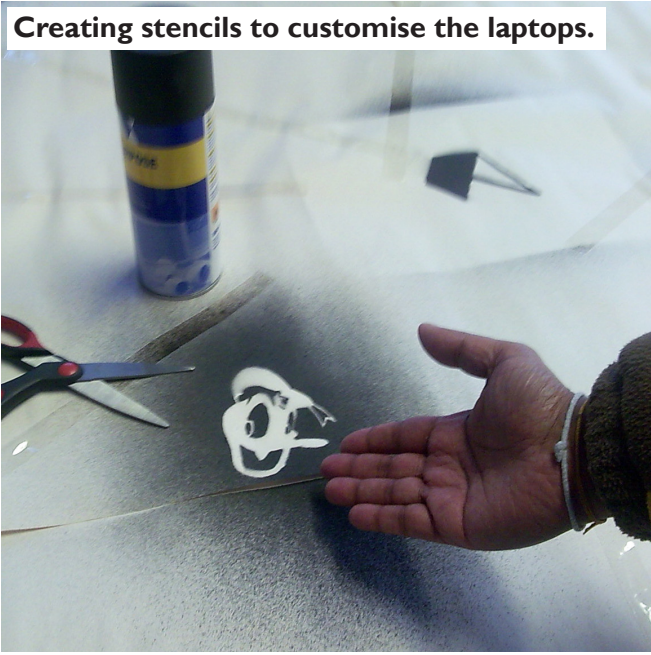


Mustafa preparing interviews.



Command line workshop.

Creating stencils to customise the laptops.



What Was Produced?

The workshop leaders created lesson plans and learning resources for each session. These are downloadable from the Zero Dollar Laptop blog and cover a wide range of activities from installing Ubuntu Linux to manipulating digital images, basic hardware maintenance, audio editing, social media, customising the computer desktop and creating a blog.

The aim of these resources was to give participants a guide for using, and a sense of the enormous creative potential of, both their laptop and the Free and Open Source Software they had installed on it. The resources are intended to give them an understanding they no longer needed to be simply passive consumers of culture but could create culture for themselves.

These resources are available for not only for participants but for potential future Zero Dollar Laptop tutors to refer to, and as tools in future workshop fundraising.

Participants created a number of resources including, colourful personal avatars (by manipulating digital images), stencils from digital images (for customising the exterior of their laptop with spray paint), customised laptop desktops, and interviews with staff members and other participants which were shared with others online via the blog during the Press Room Project. Participants' came away with an understanding of how to have a voice on the web using social media and be advocates for causes they are concerned about. This was understood as one of the major learning breakthroughs.

Reflection

Uptake of the workshops was much higher than we expected, drop out rate much lower; and the group needed to be split into morning and afternoon sessions. While attendance was usually even between morning and afternoon occasionally the unevenness caused resources to be stretched and the time keeping of a few participants meant they were unable to catch up on particular sessions.

We have learned a lot about the need for a "donation infrastructure" and a "technical infrastructure" i.e. how to acquire laptops, the time scale needed for technical work, solving the potential hardware and software problems in the context of the workshops. Workshop leader Jake Harries would recommend using different specifications of laptop for different types of workshop in the future to maximise the potential of donated technology.

There is demand among St Mungo's participants both for progression opportunities and requests for information about future workshops. In addition to the "carrot" of acquiring their own personal laptop, participants want to learn more and value the social experience of learning together about the techniques and culture of FLOSS. Others can see the potential for setting up future micro-businesses. Partners and participants recognise that there is value still to be gained from some continuation of the Zero Dollar Laptop project. Furtherfield.org and Access Space are working on plans for scaling up the project and would like to continue in dialogue with St Mungo's staff. The economic modelling needs further development; while the technology costs are very low the preparations and workshops themselves are intensive and therefore relatively expensive. The next priority is to develop a workshop series for training trainers- for this we would recruit from previous participants as well as artists and technologists in our organisations' existing networks.

Conclusion

There is a great deal of debate currently as to what “digital inclusion” actually is, and the relationship between social exclusion and digital exclusion. Agendas in the past have often focused on digital inclusion as simply access to IT, the internet and more recently uptake of and access to a faster broadband internet connection.

However, while access to the internet is usually seen as desirable in itself and counts, it seems, as digital inclusion, it is how a person uses the internet and their relationship with the creative technology available and potential for and social interaction that will make a difference to their life: this is what Zero Dollar Laptop aims to address. We aimed to create a supportive, inspiring and safe environment where each participant had a voice. Participants were genuinely pleased when they learned a new skill, discovered ideas new to them, or created something new for themselves e.g. the stencils, uploading their text and photos to the blog.

We think that participants learned best when there was a narrative which explains why they are learning a particular skill and how it fits with the bigger picture i.e. when lesson content has context. In the context of the Internet this meant understanding the value of sharing what they were creating, both with others within the group and to a wider audience via the web.



Thanks

The Furtherfield.org and Access Space teams would like to thank all the workshop participants for their engagement with the project and patience with hardware. Also to congratulate them for their technical achievements and for creating a wonderful collection of resources for the blog. We would also like to thank the following people and organisations who have inspired the development of this project: GOTO10, PureDyne, Folly and Floss Manuals. Thanks also to those people at St Mungo's who made the project possible, especially Martin Snowdon, Josephine Okoh and Amanda Pavon-Lopez. Finally we are grateful to Transformation Fund and Arts Council of England for funding the project.

Contacts and Information

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Information

Zero Dollar Laptop workshop blog: for resources and workshop plans
<http://www.furtherfield.org/zerodollarlaptop/>

Zero Dollar Laptop Artistic Team: Jake Harries and James Wallbank (Access Space); Ruth Catlow, Marc Garrett and Olga Panades (Furtherfield.org)



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