A major goal of THEory into ACTion is to share innovations in community practice. Nothing speaks innovation louder than advancements in technology over the past ten years (e.g., Google Glass, iPhone6, High Definition Television, etc.). However, advancement alone is not indicative of access. In fact, there is a digital divide across the world between individuals who have access to electronic technology (e.g., internet) and those who do not. According to Norris (2001), the digital divide encompasses three dimensions: 1) the global divide indicates disparities in Internet access between industrialized and developing countries; 2) the social divide indicates disparities between affluent and impoverished communities within these countries; and 3) the democratic divide indicates disparities between those who do and do not use digital resources to engage and participate in public life.

Developing countries and economically disadvantaged communities are faced with the challenge of accessing technologies and moving toward digital literacy. By improving digital literacy and resources, individuals can be empowered to access information and use technologies to address a variety of issues faced within their communities.
For many citizens, accessing technologies and moving toward digital literacy can be challenging and difficult to navigate. Programs that address the “digital divide” are needed, specifically those that provide technology access through outreach and education. Responding to this need, Raleigh Digital Connectors is an initiative developed by the City of Raleigh (North Carolina) to increase youths’ digital literacy. The program is nationally renowned and provides “technology training and mentoring for youth, ages 14-21. The program offers young people a chance to expand 21st century technology skills, professional life skills, participation in open data projects, exploration of career pathways, and serve their communities” (Raleigh Digital Connectors, 2014). Brittney Cofield-Poole, a doctoral student in the Psychology in the Public Interest Program at North Carolina State University, is using her training in community psychology to drive this effort forward.

Cofield-Poole serves as the program’s Community Outreach Support Specialist and has been integral in working with Raleigh’s IT Department in conducting training for partnering organizations and developing and implementing evaluation. Competencies associated with empowerment, group processes, and community leadership are vital in her role and shape how she works with community partners, staff, and youth. Not only does she develop programmatic evaluations that examine youth as civic participants, but she also designs interactive classroom activities that aim to increase students’ awareness as global citizens and engagement in service-learning projects.

For instance, youth are engaged in technology centered service-learning projects such as refurbishing computers for families in need and conducting digital literacy trainings in communities with limited technological capital. She also works with youth in implementing the curriculum, which plays an important role in increasing youths’ knowledge of technology as a
catalyst for promoting personal and economic success. Youth are engaged in discussions around the relationship between socio-economic status and access to technology and begin to see that there is value in technology access beyond a recreational capacity.

Cofield-Poole is a member of a small (three-person) IT team; however, each individual brings a unique perspective and serves as a champion for using technology in improving communities. The program manager focuses on the big picture of program sustainability, the instructor concentrates on class dynamics that promote technology relevancy, and Cofield-Poole brings a research-grounded toolkit that supports all facets of the program’s evolution. In particular, she played an important role in developing a curriculum that was based on evidence-based models. Moreover, her previous experience in community-based participatory research and civic engagement assists the program in creating avenues that bolster youth as change agents and not simply passive recipients of afterschool services.

Using community psychology as a framework, Cofield-Poole embeds learning technology within concepts of ethics, the socio-ecological model, and social structure dynamics. This framework guides curriculum activities and trainings with other youth-serving departments within the city. For example, when working with youth and other staff, a socio-ecological model is used to understand information dissemination across multiple systems. Through discussions with youth and partners, everyone can envision how civic innovation and technology serve as useful tools in community development. Above all, putting youth at the center of digital literacy and empowering them to go within their communities to develop projects creates a reciprocal process between youth and their contexts.
The values of community psychology and training also engender the use of multiple perspectives and strong research skills that incorporate both quantitative and qualitative methods in designing evaluation. To examine impact, the evaluation plan includes pre/post programmatic surveys and a mid-program focus group with youth. Data collection is implemented at various phases of the project to examine the impact of participation on an individual level as well as to receive feedback [from stakeholders] to improve learning modules, program structure, and community integration.

There are challenges associated with transitioning from graduate training to the real world. Coursework and hypothetically-focused research papers do not provide the proper hands-on learning experience that tangible community work can give. Cofield-Poole, for instance, faces the challenge of translating theory into practice and balancing community psychology principles and values within a government setting. Often administrative structures can create barriers that make program expansion difficult to achieve. For one example, engaging in systems change with bureaucratic limitations and in socio-political contexts requires a unique skill set and savvy to navigate. There are also tensions when one has to justify why community-oriented initiatives are worth the investment. By designing and implementing evaluation, Cofield-Poole aims to produce evidence that demonstrates the program is working. Through the evaluation plan, feedback loops have been created and have illustrated youth gains from participation in Raleigh Digital Connectors across a variety of outcomes.

The inclusion of a community psychology framework enhances the ways in which the program integrates youth, their experiences, and that of their contexts. Accordingly, empowering youth, strengthening community connections, and having a solid foundation in methodology are important in the program’s efforts in promoting digital literacy and addressing the digital divide.
Works Cited:


This is one of a series of bulletins highlighting the use of community psychology in practice. Comments, suggestions, and questions are welcome. Please direct them to Bill Berkowitz at Bill_Berkowitz@uml.edu.