Digital Bridgemakers

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The tumultuous circumstances caused by the global pandemic, COVID-19, forced our group to innovate and improvise. Originally, our project was focused on creating a video that would guide people through the job search process in the Twin Cities Metro area. As a result of the pandemic, all of our plans for our project changed. Many of us had to transition into working from home for our own safety and the scope of our service as CTEP members became much broader. In our day-to-day work, we saw how people who do not have access or knowledge to use technology are at a huge disadvantage in our society. We wanted to use a social media platform to teach digital literacy skills, and facilitate community building. Due to hiring freezes and the challenge of safely filming and editing a video, we decided to shift gears and focus instead on creating a meaningful online community supporting the learning of various digital literacy skills.

After much deliberation about the strengths and weaknesses of various social media platforms, we decided to use Facebook as our group's foundation. Facebook seemed to be the best choice because it is user friendly and focused on interaction at one's own pace. We believed it to be the most accessible, already frequently used by students at our sites, and most flexible format for the kind of learning structure we hoped to build. Students who did not already have Facebook simply had to create an email account and then create a Facebook account, and we were prepared to teach them how to do so. Creating a Google Mail account is a clear process and a good skill to have for students who are looking to apply to jobs, housing, childcare, and even food delivery. Also, having an email account in general is essential for many application processes now, so this would ultimately support students' overall wellbeing. We wanted any learning that was being done on the side of our group members to not be too strenuous, but still be engaging and valuable. We wanted our group members to be able to scroll through their feed, possibly read a post from our group, leave a like, comment, maybe do one of the activities we suggested in the post, and be able to move on. Either way, it was made available to them for when and where they were ready to learn. We decided to use Northstar modules as the basis for formulating each week's theme, along with a few "creative weeks" designed to teach various interactive and artistic technology dispersed throughout the timeline. The creative weeks were utilized to teach different aspects of digital literacy that Northstar does not cover, such as how to create an online video, use Google Maps, or create music. These, with the core, foundational skills Northstar teaches set students up for a quality learning experience.

The five of us each had unique strengths to contribute to content creation each week that has made this project more well-rounded, engaging, and accessible for our students. Dani contributed a sense of organization and made sure to set up and send out Zoom links to each of our meetings, and created a calendar of each week's focus with the Northstar goals surrounding the focus so that we could successfully create activities. Antonio stayed on top of our documents and powerpoints to make sure that they looked good and would be submitted on time, and brainstormed ways to keep content relevant to students. Megan helped write each of the documents that needed to be completed for our project, reviewed posts for readability, and tried to come up with more ways to increase engagement among students. Olivia kept our entire group on track with the pace and deadlines, helped us recall the goal of the project during our meetings, and spent a lot of time writing out the blog. Sammie created high quality content, especially for the creative weeks, and contributed to group discussions about each week's activities. As mentioned, some of us worked to ensure that all posts were readable for English-learners and usable to those with lower technology levels, some of us focused on tackling Northstar concepts by brainstorming different activity ideas, while others of us helped keep our group on schedule with reminders, Google Calendar, and Facebook planning. We all maintained a sense of responsibility for reminding one another to post each day, keep awareness of any issues and mention them during meetings as they came up, and think of interesting ways to present information and activities.

To maintain a consistent pace for our page, we agreed that our posts should follow a dependable format: an introduction, a brief explanation, a resource, and a follow-up question or activity that would invite interaction and allow participants to exercise technology skills. For certain posts that required an explanation that was a little more in depth, we made sure to include photos, videos, or other media to accompany the posts.

As mentioned before, each week we based posts on a different Northstar section, with the occasional creative week that allowed us as members to inform our facebook community with a random internet-related skill of our choosing. We posted to the page five times a week, and each of our group members agreed to be responsible for a different day of the week to post. Antonio created content for Mondays, Megan for Tuesdays, Sammie for Wednesdays, Olivia for Thursdays, and Dani for Fridays. We did this each week for the entire duration of our project and help remind each other of post deadlines. We made an effort to make these as relevant and engaging as possible. For example, one of our posts shows places online where you can learn languages.

Another mission of this endeavor was to be personable and entertaining. It was meant to be a fun place for learners to brush up on their skills, so the use of humor in our posts was encouraged. We did our best to present each new skill in a lighthearted way while still remaining educational. We also made sure to mention our names at the beginning of each of our posts so that students

knew who they were interacting with if they chose to comment or send a private message in relation to the skill.

When the group initially started, each of our group members had some students and contacts in mind to invite. The bulk of our group members joined from Hired's Career Connections and Metro South ABE, two CTEP sites. These sites both have high concentrations of adult learners who are interested in increasing their digital literacy skills in order to reach a variety of personal goals such as: acquiring new job positions, starting a business, connecting with family members in other countries, building a resume, passing all of the Northstar tests or even just keep boredom at bay while their families are in school or working if they are ineligible for work for some reason or another. Regardless of the reason, we figured that by reaching out specifically to these sites, we would gather an interested group of students with diverse digital literacy interests. This would capture the vision of our group, since we intended to post about a variety of topics that would encourage students to engage with their personal technology in innovative ways, or to understand the ways grade schools require kids to use technology in order to learn since school-at-home is now more prevalent than ever.

To recruit group members, we contacted the teachers at the students' respective sites and informed them of our project, encouraging them to send the information on to interested students or those they believed would benefit from interacting with our page. We also reached out to students in groups using Remind messaging, since cell phones are a very easy way to contact students during this time and not all of them go out of their way to check their school emails if they are not currently in classes. Some of our group's family members, other CTEP members from our cohort, and a few interested community members joined after we sent out personalized emails to each group or informed our friends and family of the project we created. Many languages, such as Spanish, Thai, and Somali, many English levels, and many digital-literacy levels were represented in those who decided to join our Facebook group. We also had people of all different age groups, education levels, and who come from all over the Metro area.

Over the span of our project, our facebook page garnered a small but dedicated following of students and learners. We had a total of thirty-eight group members, mostly from Metro South, which was Megan's site, and HIRED, Olivia's site, as well as a handful of other community members. Although our members are few, we are proud to have interacted with this group. We didn't start this project with many interaction expectations because our goal was not to create a mass following, but to foster a dynamic resource for tech literacy skills. Our solutions to overcoming the overall lack of general interaction with our page were primarily content-focused, introducing more relevant technology, explicitly inviting participants to interact through comments, posting more videos and using shorter posts, highlighting any special vocab words and introducing ourselves as people that can feel connected with.

The resource was free, interactive, and promised to teach a variety of skills. Initial interest was high, many students said they were really excited about the idea of there being a Facebook group that would teach them new computer skills. However, as time went on and we actually implemented the group page, overall group engagement appeared low. If students were engaging with the material posted each week or completing new activities to build their skill sets, it was not being tracked via the Facebook page because most did not leave comments, message with questions, or individually email us with any projects, thoughts, or questions. While it is possible that students were, in fact, able to learn new skills from the posts we created, it is also possible that they either read them and did not have time to complete them, or simply did not check the page. There are many reasons we believe this could be. First, many students have jobs, children and families to care for, and other responsibilities that make learning digital literacy skills not a top priority. COVID-19 also poses unique challenges to engagement, because there is no in-person support available to help students who do not understand how to navigate the Facebook page and participants may have felt uncomfortable or unsure of how to contact us to ask questions. Another reason is that in the summer months, students are traditionally enjoying time off, so they may not be seeking out structured learning opportunities instead of spending time outside with friends or families. The Facebook page also had no implications on grades or school hours, so there was no incentive for interacting other than personal interest in acquiring digital literacy skills, which for any of the reasons listed above, may not have been prioritized by participants. Sometimes people scroll through Facebook to look at interesting posts from their friends and family without the intention of doing anything that seems work- or school-related. While they may even find the activities to be interesting and intend to come back to try to learn more about it later, may forget or not end up being able to find the time in the subsequent days to try the skill presented.

Over the course of the project, our primary stumbling block was accessibility. This is normal, as it would likely present itself in any new or forming community that was trying to present information to students of varying skill levels. One way we tried to foster an equally accessible facebook group was by using appropriate language within our posts, that is, using as little figurative or decorative language as possible. Many of our students are English Language Learners, so we attempted to keep the vocabulary in our posts simple, and our messages clear. Our goal wasn't to intimidate, but to invite into an educational community. We bolded vocabulary that would likely be new or unfamiliar and followed each bolded word with a relatable, easy-to-comprehend definition. We tried to keep figures of speech to a minimum, as that can make posts wordy and complicated for students. If a post looks hard to understand at first glance, students may not try to engage, so we wanted to make them as inviting and reachable as possible, while still maintaining a challenging, stimulating environment for those students who desired to learn more about computers or had higher English levels.

The biggest opportunity we see for this project in the future is as a learning resource to be built upon by later CTEP, a permanent community of learning that only grows. CTEP members teaching classes and workshops would be able to direct students to this page to find resources, discuss old concepts and learn something new, bridging the communication technology of social media with the students of tech literacy. Additionally, the information we shared will always be there, even after our participation with the page is discontinued. It can expand in size and success even after we move on as CTEP members. We believe more interaction would be possible if the page persisted -- but luckily, specific students from our classes/workshops can access the resources, leaving behind a digital footprint for future reference. Should the direction and purpose of the group alter as time goes on, it can also be used as a hub for future classes and workshops to share information.

As a group, we come from all over the country, most of us from out of the state of Minnesota. By doing this project we learned the importance of joining communities, and building networks in- and outside of our service sites. We believe that COVID has impacted how we build and connect through communities. However, our ability to be flexible was truly the most important lesson we learned. Although we had an idea for how our project would look, and what would make it successful, so long as we made ourselves available as a resource for those who desire to learn more. Despite the obvious outside influences that made Civic engagement difficult, we are proud of the accomplishments we have made and how these accomplishments can continue to flourish even as we move on from the program. We believe that we have each been able to acquire new technology skills, and through them, new ways of engaging groups of students via technology. We believe this allows others to gain access to programs that can make their web surfing more catered to their preferences. Overall, there are definitely ways this project could be improved to better impact the community, and it has great potential for engagement in the future.