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Learning, Challenges, And Resistance: An Ethnographic Case Study on the Experiences of Job Seekers in a Public Access Computer Lab

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Abstract
This ethnographic case study focused on 19 job seekers in an urban public access computer lab to explore their challenges, learning, and criticality as related to digital platforms and systems. Keywords: adult digital literacies, public access computer labs, digital skills, technology learning

Purpose
This research project contributes to empirical scholarship exploring adult digital literacies in community spaces such as libraries and public access computer labs (Gangadharan, 2017; G. E. Jacobs & Castek, 2022; Jimoyiannis & Gravani, 2011; Noguerón-Liu, 2017; Pendell et al., 2013; Smythe, 2018; Smythe et al., 2021). As public spaces which facilitate internet access, digital skills, and workforce programs for adult learners from diverse backgrounds, the labs can provide a unique vantage point into how adults are navigating within and across various technology platforms in a complex digital age. For this current study, spending time in the labs as a researcher during career services workshops was productive in illuminating adults’ challenges, learning, and resistance as they used a variety of technologies to look for jobs. Findings illuminate the problematic aspects of platforms used in job seeking activities such as commercial job search engines and government unemployment sites. For example, commercial job search engines bombarded many of the job seekers with multiple, daily marketing emails to entice them onto the sites, with little in the way of job leads. Some predatory sites also asked for users’ personal data like birthdates in exchange for information about jobs. However, the adults in this study also learned about new technologies in ways they felt were valuable, as they developed new digital skills to pursue work and life goals. For job seekers who had gaps in employment due to childcare, or were concerned about hiring bias because of their age, crafting resumes using tools that had a more open-ended design like Microsoft Word, offered opportunities for these individuals to highlight their strengths to employers. Finally, critical incidents with two job seekers provide important examples of how adults who are ideologically portrayed as lacking digital skills, in this case older adults of color, were actively navigating and resisting predatory employment platforms. For example, one incident centered on a group of older adults who played tricks and pranks on unsuspecting robo-callers.

As a researcher, I embarked on this project with questions related to the ways ideologies, institutions, and technology platforms in adult education create barriers, and more broadly how adults learn across various contexts and with a variety of technology tools. As such, the idea of adults gaining skills as an isolated act gave way to the more process-based approach foregrounding adult learning as a cultural and historical process which happens both across an individual’s lifespan, and across communities such as the low-income urban neighborhood where the lab was located. The adults in this study were not empty vessels waiting to be upskilled by educational programs, but rather people that have learned in a variety of formal and non-formal
educational spaces. Findings from this study support a longstanding value in adult education, that adults come to educational spaces like public access computer labs with a wealth of knowledge and experiences, and they are routinely sharing knowledge across their communities as well (Fingeret, 1990).

Research questions were as follows: (1) what are the goals of job seekers in a public access computer lab; and, how do they learn and share knowledge as related to these goals; (2) how do the job seekers experience challenges related to technology platforms and institutions focused on employment; and (3) how, if at all, do the job seekers engage in criticality and resistance.

**Literature Review**

Public access computer labs are spaces that facilitate the use of computers, the internet, and other technology for the general public. From the 1990s to the mid 2000s, thousands of for-profit labs, known as cybercafés, were located in rural and urban areas in wealthy and developing countries. They offered services like fax, phone, and photocopy; resources related to education and employment; and connections to non-profits, government agencies, and local businesses for a small fee (Wahid et al., 2006). Non-profit labs, operated by libraries, recreation centers, faith based organizations, and other embedded community anchors, also emerged during this period.

The number of cybercafes began to sharply decline by the early 2010s as smartphones became cheaper and more easily available (Purnell, 2013). However, the non-profit labs remain a core strategy in combating inequalities related to technology access (Salvador et al., 2005; Sey et al., 2013). Even as of 2021, home Broadband internet remains an unequally distributed resource. According to Pew data, in the U.S., 80% of White Americans have Broadband access at home, compared to only 71% of African Americans and 65% of Hispanics (Atske & Perrin, 2021).

While this study found no statistical difference based on race or ethnicity for mobile devices like smartphones and tables, the disparity for home Broadband access, which allows children to complete homework and adults to engage in many important activities, speaks to the stubbornly high cost of internet in the U.S. In this country, our cities have among the highest Broadband costs as compared to other cities in Europe and Asia (Cain Miller, 2014). In some urban areas, the lack of in home Broadband may be partly an infrastructural problem which has been referred to as digital redlining: “a pattern of long-term, systematic failure to invest in the infrastructure required to provide equitable, mainstream Internet access to residents of the central city (compared to the suburbs) and to lower-income city neighborhoods” (Callahan, 2017, para. 32). In an analysis of data from the American Community Survey (ACS) and the Federal Communications Commission’s Broadband Deployment report, Siefer and Callahan (2020) showed that rural areas in the U.S. were much more likely to qualify for Federal subsidies for home Broadband access, which has mostly targeted these rural counties where according to ACS data the majority of residents were White. Urban areas, where ACS data showed the majority of residents were people of color, were much less likely to live in an area that qualified for government subsidies to receive low-cost Broadband.

Public access computer labs not only provide internet and technology access, but are also important spaces for digital skills and workforce classes. Much research on these learning activities in the labs has focused on the importance of social supports during this process, primarily in terms of staff. Jacobs et al. (2014) found that having a staff (whether paid or volunteer) present is an important component of the labs: “when adult learners have a positive
experience acquiring new skills with the face-to-face support of patient tutors, they acquire the strategies and confidence necessary to explore the digital landscape and engage with new challenges,” (p 626). Similarly, other research projects have noted the anxiety that many adults may experience learning new technology in the context of the labs (Jacobs & Casteck, 2018; Jimoyiannis & Gravani, 2011). For example, Jimoyiannis and Gravani (2011) explored an in-person digital literacy course taught in a government-funded program in Greece, highlighting the excitement of these adult learners but also their fear and hesitancy when it comes to engaging with technology. In this sense, staff are critical to not only to provide technical expertise, but also to create a supportive learning environment. Having welcoming, supportive staff has also increased retention during open access lab time. Pendell et al. (2013) found that learners were more likely to return to drop-in supports because of strong relationships with staff and volunteers.

Methods

The public access computer lab in this study was in a predominately African American community in a Northeastern city ten minutes from the downtown. Participants included three staff and 19 “jobseekers” defined as individuals I worked with 1-1 during career workshop drop-in sessions which occurred once per week over a six month period (although many visited regularly for different purposes, as discussed below). Ethnographic case study (Haas Dyson & Genishi, 2005; Hornberger, 1997; Nabi et al., 2009; Street, 2011), was used to shed light on the digital literacy practices of staff/job-seekers in the lab as they engaged with each other, technology, and the physical space. Data was collected over six-months, including 74 hours observation (70 hours in the physical lab and 4 hours zoom workshops); semi-structured interviews with three jobseekers and three staff; emails/flyers, and other documentation; photographs of computer screens and the lab, and analytic memos. For analysis, I used in vivo coding to honor participants’ perspectives, and a priori codes drawing from key conceptual terms and concepts (Saldaña, 2021). I member checked interview summaries to ensure fidelity to participants’ perspectives.

Discussion and Implications

As a whole, findings of this project spoke not only to the challenges and tensions embedded in technologies for job seekers in a public access computer lab, but also the centrality of adult learning and knowledge sharing in addressing these challenges. As such, this study has implications for those concerned with teaching and learning related to adult digital literacies and workforce development. Findings may spark conversations regarding thoughtful approaches to integrating technology which take into account how adults are learning and sharing knowledge across their communities, in addition to the kinds of more formal kinds of learning happening in adult education programs.

Public access computer labs like the one in this study can be vital, not only in providing programs and resources which support adult learning, but also in encouraging and amplifying adults’ criticality and resistance, which may eventually bring about needed systemic change. This project also speaks to the importance of opportunities to engage in critical education (Freire, 2014; Luke, 2012; Shor, 1999) related to how adults from marginalized groups experience technology and address structural barriers. Critical education as related to digital literacy has been used in other contexts as a way of engaging in consciousness-raising activities related to the production and consumption of digital texts and multimedia (Avila & Zacher Pandya, 2013).
This project urges practitioners to see adult learners, not as empty vessels coming to “upskill,” but as individuals who are already pushing back against systems in provocative ways, which can be leveraged for more coordinated social justice projects in adult education. As such, this project has important implications for a wide variety of practitioners, such as individuals enacting pedagogy related to technology and digital literacies; working in community technology spaces like libraries and non-profits; designing online applications and websites for government and commercial entities related to workforce development and digital inclusion; and enacting policy at the local, state, and federal levels focused on digital and educational equity.

This project’s goals were deeply shaped by my experiences as a former practitioner, and this research project was transformative in terms of how I inhabit learning spaces. For others currently in a site of practice, practitioner inquiry can be a transformative opportunity to grow and evolve their approaches (Cochran-Smith & Lytle, 2009). As an approach foregrounding local knowledge, practitioner inquiry can be instrumental in understanding adult learners and adult education spaces with additional depth and from new perspectives. This process of inquiry can help to democratize learning spaces by uncovering and problem-solving approaches to teaching and learning which currently sustain power asymmetries.

References


Siefer, A., & Callahan, B. (2020). Limiting Broadband Investment to "Rural Only" Discriminates Against Black Americans and other Communities of Color.


