

Distance Learning, Telematics and Rural Social Exclusion

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BACKGROUND

ADAPTthroughRATIO (AtR) was established to address social exclusion in the South West of the United Kingdom (Devon, Cornwall and Somerset) which has relatively weak employment opportunities. In this area, average earnings and disposable income are low, and the number of firms going out of business is high (ADAPTthroughRATIO, 1998). The Gross Domestic Product (GDP) per head in Cornwall is 71.2% of the UK average (and is the lowest in the UK), while 36% of employees are in part-time employment. Part-time work, geographical dislocation and low wages/job security are major problems throughout the rest of the South West region. The region has been affected by the decline of all its traditional industries (mining, farming, fishing and marine-related industries), as well as the reduction of the defence industries and services.

Almost all (90%) of private sector employees in the three counties work in companies of less than ten people, which is far higher than anywhere else in the UK. One significant consequence of this is that training diffusion from larger firms to smaller ones through both employee diffusion, and production/service networks between companies, remains low. Yet even these figures underestimate the extent of difficulties in most of the region. Most of the large employers are centred around Plymouth (the only significant urban centre in the South West) and the Eastern fringe (along the M5 motorway). The level of isolation and marginality in Cornwall, most of Devon and West Somerset is even more extreme than average for the region as a whole suggest (ADAPTthroughRATIO, 1998).

The empirical research that prompted the more theoretical questions addressed here has in part been reported already (David: 1999, 2001 and 2003). The research was an evaluation of a telematically delivered distance learning programme in the South West of the United Kingdom. The project involved the design of training packages to be delivered through a string of telecentres across Devon, Cornwall and West Somerset. The research involved interviews with product developers, telecentre managers, centre users and non-users in particular localities. Whilst the findings produced immediate conclusions, some more abstract questions

have emerged more slowly. Firstly there were questions of relative success or failure in facilitating distance learning. The findings suggested that while the technical infrastructure was successfully set in place, the social communication networks that operated through these new media were weakened by significant divergences of orientation amongst the key players.

Training product developers (mainly local colleges) saw telecentres in areas of rural marginality as weak markets. While funded to develop training products that could be networked to such centres, developers were free to pursue more lucrative markets, such as home computer users and larger firms with training budgets. Hence, the developers were not fully committed to the telecentres.

There was continual pressure on the Telecentre managers for operational funds. Most of the project budget had been consumed by the product development teams, and as products were to be delivered free to users, centre budgets were under continued pressure to meet these obligations. Telecentres were only given funding on the basis of outputs defined in terms of completed courses. This was not always what users wanted. Very often they wanted specific training for very specific applications which often had limited wider use. Further, the telecentres did not have the budgets to offer flexible opening hours or training as widely as they, and many users, would have wished.

Non-users often suggested they could not see the value of computer training in an area of low income, low skill and high seasonal employment turnover. Issues related to longer-term career development were considered as something of an abstraction that did not resonate with the work based conditions experienced every day.

The second and broader question arose in relation to the underlying assumptions behind a project that saw information access as the fundamental vehicle for overcoming social exclusion. The presumption seemed to be that the problem of social exclusion lay in ignorance, rather than in the structural conditions in which people lived. In other words, "It was in their heads, not their lives." There also appeared to be an assumption that the socially included (especially the experts and educators) were the solution.

In some contrast to this position, David (1999, 2001) has suggested that the socially included were as much the problem as they were the solution. The orientation of the socially included towards themselves (the product developers orientation to those able to pay) in and of itself generated social exclusion. Yet these orientations were reinforced by the very projects that claimed to be overcoming exclusion. For a researcher engaged in action research of this nature, a serious problem arises when the stated project “goals” become unclear or disputed during this course of the investigation.

This research was ethnographic in nature and involved spending time with users in their physical space for extended periods of relatively unstructured time, rather than interacting with them either online or solely through the medium of a structured questionnaire. The research was also designed as “Participatory Action Research” (PAR). Hence, it aimed to involve the “researched” in the design and analysis of the research, and was oriented towards facilitating the goals of the “researched” (Whyte, 1991; David, 2003; David & Sutton, 2004). Work as a researcher in such situations can be problematic as the explicit action-oriented nature of the research is tied to facilitating the commonly understood goals of the project. Different interpretations of the project’s goals can emerge (and did in this case) during the course of the research. While having a degree of discretion in the design and conduct of the research, the role of the action researcher also involves conflicts over who can be counted as a participant. Further, such an approach raises issues of actor motivation. In this particular case, we needed to examine what were the “goals” that the research was aiming to achieve? Were the priorities to be related to the goals of:

1. The coordinators, who wished to give a good account of themselves;
2. The product developers, who were motivated to make a product that could be marketed more widely than only to those that could not afford to pay;
3. The centre managers, who wanted to keep their centres open;
4. The individual or collective needs of the users; and
5. Those who did not use the centres, but might have done so if provision or publicity had been different?

The users were a self-selecting sample and this research also interviewed local non-users with the aim of identifying perceptions of need amongst this group. The inclusion of the voices of potential “participants” was seen as being important in this research which was grounded in “social inclusion/exclusion” as the mere act of participation itself was skewed towards the “so-

cially included.” Was this legitimate? The question of “Who defines the goals?” comes to the fore once again. This also raises the question of the methodology of this type of social research and reflects something more general in supporting policy formation and implementation.

THIRD WAY POLICY-BASED RESEARCH AND ACTION RESEARCH

The Third Way offers a contradictory approach to politics and policy. On the one hand we are asked to believe that the Third Way represents a renewal of politics, whilst on the other hand it is suggested that it represents a movement beyond political vision (or ideology) towards a more practical and perhaps even de-politicised form of “problem solving.”

The role of the social researcher in such a context, and indeed of research itself, is both elevated and confined. In a recent speech titled, “Influence or Irrelevance: can Social Science improve Government?” to the United Kingdom’s Economic and Social Research Council (the largest source of social research funding in the UK), David Blunkett (then Secretary of State at the UK Department of Education & Employment) demonstrated this ambivalence (Blunkett, 2000). David Blunkett represented a Labour government, which had frequently announced its enthusiasm for social research. Researchers generally considered this in stark contrast to the attitudes of the preceding Conservative governments, which had seemed actively hostile towards most social research and favoured research based on rational economics. Blunkett’s speech also outlined to the UK social research community the role it could play within the policy making process. He criticised social researchers for:

1. Research that did not take account of the political, economic or social realities that government faces;
2. Research that was aimed at “esoteric journals”;
3. Research that did not start from and orient itself towards a “user focus”;
4. Research that concluded with goals that are not “realistic or achievable.”

He made it perfectly clear that research needed to be oriented towards solving problems within realistic parameters, rather than in the formulation of abstract and critical evaluations of social conditions or policy responses. Such abstraction and critique was “ideological” insofar as it is not pragmatic. While Third Way government claims to want to base its policy on sound research, researchers were asked to frame their research increasingly within the parameters of govern-

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