

Potential OR Center of Excellence in community learning & resource development
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To The Oak Ridger:

A previous letter suggested that we have exceptional capacity to build Centers of Excellence associated with an Oak Ridge Community Development Laboratory, one of which will be introduced here, with the rest introduced in subsequent letters.

This letter offers ideas, questions and perspectives related to the potential Center of Excellence in community learning and resource development, the intent being to at least foster discussion, if not inspire champions to facilitate consultation and action which will turn some of these ideas into reality.

Potential Oak Ridge Center of Excellence in Community Learning and Resource Development

Oak Ridge is already a model learning community. But what if we were to build on our successes with a strategic goal of becoming a world-renowned "learning community" to which international leaders in the field of education and community learning come to learn how and why we are so successful in this field?

The "community learning and resource development" title has a two-fold meaning. It refers to both the development and dissemination of "community learning resources" and involvement of the entire community in "learning resource development and dissemination."

What if we were to further integrate home-schools, public and private educational institutions, training centers; human resource development departments of business, government and not-for-profit organizations, plus our research and development facilities, around a collective project of addressing the learning and development needs for five populations over the next 20 years; those populations being our newborns, 20-, 40-, 60-, and 80-year-olds.

In just 20 years we would have an individual and community development curriculum which spanned a 100-year life cycle.

At the heart of learning community integration and development are mechanisms for continuously assessing, aggregating and prioritizing community learning needs, desires, learning preferences and accessibility for learning events and activities; then matching those needs with existing resources for filling them.

The gaps between the needs and available, affordable resources in our community will provide opportunities for spawning cooperatives and business startup as learning solution brokers, developers and providers.

One of the concerns about enhanced retail development as a catalyst for solving our community's financial woes is that much of our large and growing senior population has "been there, done that" when it comes to major shopping sprees and focusing on the material pleasures of life.

The wisdom of age seems to raise the value of those intangible aspects of life, such as relationships, service and learning. Is that not an exceptional source of ideas and energy for developing the foundation of a model learning community?

Several years ago, when the city of Cupertino, Calif., wanted to introduce the Internet to its community, it chose to train its senior citizens as tutors for the rest of the community. That turned out to be a very successful initiative. Might this not be a great way for all concerned to introduce new learning technologies, systems and resources to our community?

What if we were to systematically encourage learning triads of one or more students, seniors, and active business professionals or representatives of community organizations to seek solutions to some of the most challenging problems faced by local businesses, organizations and the community.

In addition to solving problems, this intergenerational team-building would likely result in very beneficial relationships which would strengthen the fabric of our community.

There is immense potential synergistic value of a Senior Center in close proximity to the teacher resources and technology centers for the Oak Ridge schools.

Two models of community learning which are particularly noteworthy in the degree to which they address community learning needs are the Oak Ridge Institute for Continued Learning and Oak Ridge National Laboratory's recent conference on "Overcoming Barriers Facing Persons with Disabilities Through Application of Technologies."

ORICL sprouted from a group of individuals who wanted a vehicle for both learning and sharing lessons learned on a variety of subjects which were not being addressed elsewhere. Although still a young organization, the demand for many of its classes exceeds available classroom space and facilities.

ORNL's conference brought together representatives of organizations serving people with disabilities to introduce the mission and work of their respective organizations, as well as to highlight their most challenging issues.

ORNL engineers and scientists then presented several of the lab's technologies with potential for better serving needs of people with disabilities. The matching of needs and capabilities which have promise for developing into viable products and solutions to those most challenging issues will continue to be explored, encouraged and financially supported.

"Anchor" concepts and stories have been proven to facilitate more meaningful and effective learning. What if we launched a community-wide initiative to supplement existing curriculum and to develop new learning modules, which related learning to the anchor concepts of the "individual/human body," the "group/family/team" and the "community"?

We all get an early start, then continue acquiring experience with these anchor concepts throughout our whole lives.

The research and work being done by ORNL and companies like REMOTEC in enhancing, replicating and extending the capabilities of the human body are ideal examples of how studying specific technical applications can raise appreciation for a wide array of academic subjects, as well for the amazing masterpiece of integrated systems which make up the human body, a companion we all too frequently take for granted and abuse.

Trying to deal with the exponential proliferation of technology can be overwhelming, especially since most of it is being developed at levels that are beyond our unaided sensory perception. And yet every bit of it can be related to one or more aspects of the body, mind and spirit that we live with our entire earthly lives.

It is becoming increasingly advantageous, if not essential for their survival and success, that our children learn how to effectively utilize highly integrated communication systems, as well as how to communicate with only their voice, pen and theatrical resources.

Helping students develop the capability to produce high quality, needs-guided, on-demand learning materials,

accessible via the Internet, CDs, DVDs and portable digital devices, will serve them well in whatever they do.

Building studio quality production capabilities into new construction conference rooms, classrooms and other learning facilities will increase the capacity to produce high-quality learning events and resources.

With access to facilities which enable interactive, live video conferencing with the capacity to include supplemental video, audio and image resources, reasonably accessible to those with various disabilities, we can become familiar with communication tools that will eventually become the means by which we do much of our long-distance communication.

By building systems for capturing, enhancing, storing and disseminating (locally and globally), multiple format and multimedia learning resources produced in the above facilities, we can add value to the numerous presentations by subject matter experts which take place in Oak Ridge every year.

This studio/production approach could significantly reduce the time and travel costs associated with conference presentations.

Whether or not there was a real-time audience for the original presentation, the final presentation product(s) could be made accessible to both large and isolated audiences throughout the world as needed.

Conference resources (whether electronic or in person) could then be shifted from large audience presentation toward facilitating consultation and collective problem solving.

In preparation for increased recognition in the value of consultation and developing the capacity for collective problem solving, what if we were to establish provisions by which Oak Ridge homes that met specific criteria could be converted into bed-and-breakfast or daytime mini-conference and learning centers?

In addition to serving the meeting, conferencing and learning needs of local businesses and organizations, this initiative would be an economic infusion for local hospitality support services, could attract visitors and dollars from outside the area and would likely attract potential residents.

David Sperry

Oak Ridge

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