

Create a sense of place through ICT

The Futurelab Local Case Study Report (PDF)

The location of Futurelab's case study was Windmill Hill City Farm in Bristol. The farm is an independent community project that aims to meet the needs of local people through a wide range of social, environmental, educational, recreational and economic activities. Different groups of people use the farm for different purposes. Mothers take babies in pushchairs to see the animals and there are facilities for mothers and children to come together in a warm, convivial atmosphere. There are facilities for children; an adventure playground and an allweather sports pitch. There is a computer laboratory which hosts courses and drop-in sessions. There is a café and spaces where community groups can hold meetings.

Futurelab was a partner in a project called Mobile Bristol, which was set up to explore the uses of mobile technologies in the city. One of the project's founding partners was Hewlett Packard, who are developing software to create mediascapes. A mediascape is a collection of sounds and images associated with specific locations by global positioning system (GPS) that can then be experienced in situ using a hand-held device such as a personal digital assistant (PDA) or mobile phone. The aim is to allow users to explore and interact with location in innovative and varied ways. For the Puente project Futurelab set out to assemble intergenerational groups of farm users to capture the groups' perceptions of the farm on mediascapes, as part of the farm's thirtieth birthday celebrations. The first stage in the implementation of this was to hold a co-design session with stakeholders from the farm to plan the main activity. The main activity was a second co-design session which was held on a very cold, wet day in December 2006 in the farm's community room. There were thirteen participants, divided into four groups of mixed generations. There were local primary school children, members of a local history group (all in their seventies) and staff from the farm. They were all familiar with the place, but they normally used it for different purposes and did not normally meet each other. They were asked to work together to design a mediascape for a different age group. The groups were largely self-managed but they were assisted and facilitated by at least one Futurelab researcher. The subjects the participants chose for their mediascapes were:

- the impact of the Second World War on the area;
- the farm throughout the seasons;
- the area now and in prehistory;
- a quiz based around images of the location.

The tools comprised laptops, GPS-enabled PDAs, digital maps, audio recorders and digital cameras. Recordings were made outside at the farm, or inside the farm's community room, and each item was then associated digitally with a location on the farm. The mediascapes were put together and tested on the laptops, and then loaded onto the PDAs for use outside.

Everyone was very busy all day and many became absorbed in the task, even though the weather was bad. They worked right up until the end of the day. There was a little time at the end to evaluate the mediascapes. The participants felt that they had achieved what they set out to do, but they noted that the PDA screens were not easy to see out of doors and the GPS was not sufficiently accurate. The ten people who filled in the questionnaire thought that creating a mediascape was "brilliant fun" or "mostly fun".

From this activity, the Futurelab researchers drew the following conclusions:

- It is important that participants have an individual and a shared commitment to the activity.
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- An IGL group needs a sense of purpose, preferably associated with an authentic task.
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- It helps to have plenty of time allocated for the task. (This was not the case at Windmill City Farm, where the participants could only spare a day.)
- It is important that there is sufficient time for the group to gel, particularly if the members of the group do not know each other well beforehand. Ideally three sessions are needed to make a mediascape. The first would be to establish a shared agenda as a group; this includes getting to know each other as well as agreeing content. The second is to create and revise the mediascape. The final session would be letting others use the mediascape and getting feedback and the opportunity to revise as well as performing the same task for others. Evaluation and iteration are important parts of the process.
- Adequate resources are required in terms of technology, additional material used and location.
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- The location is more important than the technology in encouraging intergenerational activities.

An important aspect of this intergenerational scenario was the notion of the "third place", a convivial space where people can mix socially and be creative together. Windmill Hill City Farm is a good example of a third place, but there was no interest that was shared by all generations. For some it was a workplace, for others it was a sports ground and others a social space to discuss local history. Futurelab's challenge was to inspire intergenerational groups to

work together to create a shared perception which would be meaningful to other groups, to leave traces and trails which could be appreciated, and perhaps built on, by visitors to the farm in the future.

The Pervasive Media Studio in Bristol is continuing to develop the mediascape concept, Windmill Hill City Farm has continued with digital projects on "Telling Stories with Images and Words" and Futurelab won a New Statesman New Technology Award for their "Create-A-Scape" website.