

New Technology in the Human Services

Contents

UpFront

Papers

The Probation Service and the NPSISS Project

Practice and Policy Papers

Introducing Information Systems in Social Services -
the LACCS experience

Case Based Learning, towards a computer tool for
learning with cases

Computers in Child Care: conversion of a children's
resource to multimedia and preliminary test results

Reviews

Contents

Up Front

Papers

- 2 The Probation Service and the NPSISS Project *David Colombi*

Practice and Policy Papers

- 7 Introducing Information Systems in Social Services - the LACCS experience *Keith Moultrie*
- 11 Case Based Learning, towards a computer tool for learning with cases *Albert Visser*
- 14 Computers in Child Care: conversion of a children's resource to multimedia and preliminary test results *Les Cowan*

Reviews

- 20 Social Work Reference Library *reviewed by Bryan Glastonbury*
- 21 Database of Social Research Methodology *reviewed by Bryan Glastonbury*
- 23 Twentieth Century Mortality *reviewed by Bryan Glastonbury*
- 24 Research Methods for Social Work and Nursing *reviewed by Neil Ballantyne*
- 27 Effective Policy, Planning and Implementation *reviewed by Rob Sykes*
- 29 Organizations and Communication Technology *reviewed by Bob Sapey*

New Technology in the Human Services is a quarterly journal devoted to the dissemination of information about the application of information and information technology in the human services.

New Technology in the Human Services holds copyright on all articles and texts published in this journal. Apart from standard referencing in other publications, no part of this journal may be reproduced in any way without prior agreement from the editors.

New Technology in the Human Services takes no responsibility for the contents of the contributions. The opinions expressed are those of the authors, and not necessarily those of the editors or publishers.

New Technology in the Human Services is edited by *Jan Steyaert* and *Ann Wilkinson*. You can contact them at the addresses given below. The editorial board also includes *Harmen Grebel* and *Jackie Rafferty*. Consulting editors are *Stuart Toole* and *Bryan Glastonbury*, both former editors of this journal. The editorial advisory network consists of the following:

Gail Auslander, Hebrew University, Jerusalem, Israel

Colin Barnes, Social Service Department, Coventry, United Kingdom

Nick Gould, University of Bath, United Kingdom

Don Mabey, Centrecare St John, Canada

Robert MacFadden, University of Toronto, Canada

David Phillips, University of Sheffield, United Kingdom

Ignace Snellen, Erasmus University, Rotterdam, the Netherlands

Laraine Stewart, CCETSW, United Kingdom

New Technology in the Human Services is published by Causa (the Netherlands) and CHST (UK). You can contact the editors and publishers at these addresses:

Causa,
Fontys Hogescholen
Postbus 347
5600 AH Eindhoven
The Netherlands
Tel: +31-40-2605940
Fax: +31-40-2435274
Email: J.Steyaert@fontys.nl
WWW: <http://www.fz.hse.nl/causa/>



Centre for Human Service Technology
Department of Social Work Studies
University of Southampton
Southampton SO17 1BJ
UK
+44-1703-593536
+44-1703-592779
Annw@chst.soton.ac.uk
<http://www.soton.ac.uk/~chst>

Subscription to the journal

To subscribe to the journal *New Technology in the Human Services*, contact CHST at the above address. The subscription rates for Volume 11 will be:

	United Kingdom	Europe	Outside Europe
Individuals	15 UK pounds	20 UK pounds	35 US dollars
Institutions with CCETSW courses	30 UK pounds		
Institutions & libraries	50 UK pounds	50 UK pounds	80 US dollars

Submissions to the journal

We welcome papers, articles and reviews from both academics and practitioners. Please read the guidelines for contributors on the back inside cover and do not hesitate to contact either of the editors.

ISSN No: 0959 0684



Up Front

Inside this issue

During 1997 when browsing through *Computers in Human Services*, I came across a review of the book *The Probation Service and Information Technology*. The reviewer issued a challenge to the author to provide a sequel which allowed readers to follow the saga to its conclusion. David Colombi has been encouraged to provide another instalment but it is unlikely that this is the final contribution which will be made to the Probation technology debate. The Home Office has been sent a copy of this paper in the hope they might provide a response but at the date of publication no written response had been received. The editor will be happy to consider contributions on this subject from either the Home Office or practitioners.

Three reports have been included in our practice and policy section. All derive from presentations made at the *ssalt 97* conference last summer.

Keith Moultrie explores the very human problems of helping social services departments to integrate computer systems into their working practices. Many of the solutions and strategies are not unfamiliar to those who have been reviewing the literature on management information systems in the social services over the past ten years. They still need re-iterating as increasing dependence on Communications and Information Technology (C&IT) for successful working permeates the workplace.

Albert Visser is proposing the use of C&IT for a different purpose; improving the integration of theory and practice in the training of new social workers in the Netherlands. He describes the development of a database of client information (cases) and the pedagogical approach in developing students skills in handling cases. It is proposed this approach is then extended to support students when they enter practice by allowing them to use the database of cases and solutions to help them work with current cases.

Les Cowan is also proposing new tools for practice - this time for direct client use. He argues for the increased development and use of multi-media software for working with troubled children and describes his own experiences in this field.

The reviews section is very full in this issue and some items have been held for the next issue. Bryan

Glastonbury has looked at three CD-ROMs which are linked to social work, Neil Ballantyne has reviewed the ProCare Research Methods courseware and Rob Sykes and Bob Sapey give their views on two books. The supply of materials arriving on the desk of the editor is growing and we would like to increase our panel of voluntary reviewers. There are few material rewards and in the case of software you may not even get a licence to keep and use materials after the review.

HUSITA - 5

In January 1998 a seminar will take place in Budapest, Hungary organised by Jan Steyaert of Causa in the Netherlands to decide the themes for this conference. An invited group of speakers will make presentations on their view of the current influences and developments in C&IT in relation to the Human Services. It is hoped that these papers will be made available via the web. Jackie Rafferty will be representing CHST.

Change of Editorship

The last two volumes of *New Technology in the Human Services* have been published in partnership with Causa, Fontys Hogescholen in the Netherlands. The Centre for Human Service Technology will be the sole publisher of the journal for Volume 11. I have now been editing the journal since issue 8:2 and although I will still remain involved on the editorial board I have decided that I need to stand down for a period. Jackie Rafferty will be the lead editor for volume 11 and she will be the first point of contact for writers and reviewers. Mary Busby remains our subscription secretary. The website for *New Technology in the Human Services* will be transferred to CHST in February, please remember to change your bookmarks and links. The new address will be <http://www.soton.ac.uk/~chst/nths>

Reference

Colombi D, (1996), *The Probation Service and Information Technology*, Ashgate, Aldershot. Reviewed in *Computers in Human Services* Vol. 13 No. 1 1996.

Ann Wilkinson

Papers

The Probation Service and the NPSISS Project

Dr David Colombi

Abstract

This paper seeks to bring up readers up to date with the development and implementation of the National Probation Service Information Systems Strategy (NPSISS). The first section supplies background information which is of primary relevance for new readers or those less familiar with events. The second section, *Project and Software Dilemmas* deals with issues around the computerised client system and project management. The third section brings us up to date with progress in implementation. The final section *Beyond CRAMS* looks at other areas of development within Probation and other settings. As some comment is critical, the Home Office were invited, in the interests of academic fairness, to respond to criticisms. At the time of publication no response had been made.

Introduction and the background to NPSISS

The UK Probation Service is primarily responsible for the supervision of offenders on Community Sentences such as Probation Orders, Community Service Orders and Combination Orders and also for supervising offenders during and on release from custody. This work includes providing reports on offenders to Youth Courts, Magistrates Courts and the Crown Court to assist in sentencing decisions. The service also has responsibility in civil cases involving disputes over child in separation and divorce. It is organised as fifty five separate probation services in England, Wales and Northern Ireland, but not in Scotland which includes probation in its Social Work Departments. Services are managed by a local Chief Probation officer, accountable to a Probation Committee, but are 80% financed by the Home Office which determines national policy and practice guidelines through its Probation Department. There is a central Inspectorate of Probation and an Association of Chief Officers of Probation (ACOP) which advises on policy issues. The National Association of Probation Officers (NAPO) acts as the professional association and trade union for probation grade staff. The Probation Service is facing an uncertain future both because of proposals to turn it into a 'Correction Service' and in relation to professional education and training.

The formal launch of NPSISS came in November 1993 (Home Office) as the work of the recently established *Information Systems Strategy Unit* at the Home Office Probation Department. It was a time of optimism and promise for those who had been involved for many fraught years on issues about introduction of information technology into the probation service (see Colombi, 1994 for an analysis of the relevant history). NPSISS was broadly welcomed by Probation Service organisations, helped by the emphasis on probation services managing systems locally and significant involvement of probation staff on planning and implementation of the strategy. The sense of a new partnership between the Home Office and local probation services helped overcome earlier reservations about the

David Colombi is a research fellow at the Centre for Human Service Technology, University of Southampton. He works on courseware development and as a co-ordinator for the CTI Centre for Human Services. He is author of *The Probation Service and Information Technology*.

Contact him at:

CHST
Department of Social Work Studies
University of Southampton
Southampton
SO17 1BJ
UK

Tel: 01703 593536
Fax: 01703 592779
email: david@chst.soton.ac.uk

idea of a single information system to manage information about clients of the service.

Part of the wider context for the national strategy was the initiative for *Co-ordination of Computerisation with the Criminal Justice System* (CCCS). The decision for a single client system placed the Probation Service on a par with the Crown Prosecution Service, the Crown Court and the Prison Service of developing single national systems (SCOPE, CREST and IIS/LIDS respectively). In contrast Magistrates Courts, like Social Services Departments, have diverse software systems but establishing common performance standards through the MASS program. The police have also established national systems for criminal records and operational information. There is a project to move criminal records to a separate agency serving the needs of all criminal justice agencies.

The four main ingredients of NPSISS were set out in a Home Office leaflet aimed at explaining to all staff the benefits of the strategy. These ingredients are examined in turn:

- A set of strategic aims, principles, objectives and plans that together contribute the NPSISS vision.
- A set of proposed applications and how these might be developed and used.
- A business case
- Technical and infrastructure issues.

Strategic aims

The strategic aims of NPSISS centred round what became known as the 'NPSISS vision' that 'Relevant timely information should be available to all staff, where appropriate at any location from a single source as an integral part of the working environment' (Home Office, 1993a). This was part of a broader vision of ensuring that 'the development and use of information and the use of information systems will support, and be seen to support the Probation Service through to the year 2000 and beyond'. Information was identified as a 'key operational resource and management resource' with 'spending on IS/IT ... brought firmly under the control of the Probation Service and ... geared to operational priorities and aims.' The latter was to be achieved through a *National Information Systems Steering Committee* to steer implementation of NPSISS and establish national and local boundaries of responsibility. While the vision commanded wide support within the various service organisations, what the strategy omitted was any significant reference to ethical issues around confidentiality, data protection and data security.

NPSISS applications

A set of proposed applications was the second ingredient and fifteen of these were identified in the NPSISS Appendix, which set out the potential benefits of each. The flagship product was and is CRAMS, the *Case Record, Administrative and Management System* to manage all information on court appearances, reporting, supervision and other work with

offenders and civil work clients, including probation hostels, community service and prison throughcare. CRAMS was required to be both an operational tool geared to the needs of practice staff (implicitly, ultimately replacing written records) and also a management tool which provided statistical and other information needed by local managers, the Home Office and other bodies for management and accountability of the service.

The other applications identified in the NPSISS Strategy included the *Resource Management Information System* (RMIS) and other management related applications such as finance systems, payroll, personnel systems, asset management, business planning and workload management. At an operational level there was reference to a *Services Register* which would ensure that probation officers are aware of available resource, but no mention of the potential of the technology as a source of practice and policy information, as a professional guidance tool, as a training tool, for client assessment or as a tool for direct work with and by clients. It was clear that the needs of practice were seen as secondary to the needs of managers, perhaps in part through a failure to examine the potential of the technology to contribute to practice, but also reflecting use of probation managers as the source of the ideas. Whatever the reasons, the effect was to make the NPSISS vision appear somewhat myopic.

The business case

Third on the Home Office list of ingredients was the Business Case. Here the conclusion was that with the, then, £340 million cost of the Probation Service, implementation of the information strategy would lead to productivity improvement savings of 10% but this was described as a conservative estimate and a more optimistic figure of 20% is quoted in NPSISS, giving an annual saving of £54 million. This savings figure has been subsequently amended to 7% but with little evidence of how savings are to be achieved in practice. One key area was a projected decrease in the numbers in technology and information support staff, although subsequent guidelines to Probation Services from the hardware and software suppliers indicate the need for an increase rather than a decrease in such posts.

The reality has been budget cuts imposed on services with the responsibility for achievement of these held locally, with consequent cuts in clerical staff posts and front line services. The West Sussex Probation Service *Annual Report 1996/7* provides a graphic example of a service having to cut staff while at the same time investing substantial sums on further technology of questionable benefit over its existing infrastructure.

Technical and infrastructure issues

The final NPSISS ingredient was initially the most contentious. The NPSISS appendix set out four main infrastructure options and identified contracted out computer services or regional consortia sharing computers centres as the two preferred options. At a time of rapidly increased use of local and area networks using client-server structures,

there was resistance from some Probation Service organisations, particularly from within the *Computer Mangers Group* within ACOP (*Association of Chief Officers of Probation*) to these ideas and to planned dependence on 'dumb terminals'. The decision was made to apply TAP or *Total Application Process* with three companies invited to propose an infrastructure solution and bid for providing and implementing the hardware, networking and software.

None of the companies selected supported either of the Home Office preferred infrastructure options. The solution chosen kept individual probation services as the basic operational unit using client-server networks. The subsequent contract was allocated to Bull Worldwide Information Systems, working with PARITY and COGNOS as sub-contacting suppliers. The concept of a totally managed system meant that services would contract with the suppliers for provision, installation, management and support of the systems. The network is now the largest in the Criminal Justice System with the recent addition of a 'superhub' for distributing information to services - for example twice daily updating of the EASI database described below. There is also pilot work on remote access allowing probation officers to access e-mail from portable computers. 'Firewalls' are used to restrict access to those who have the right access authorisation and these are being installed by a number of services.

Software Dilemmas

Along with concern about infrastructure was some concern about the proposed software development route for the CRAMS client software. A second review of existing systems had, in 1993, favoured adapting the system used in Northumbria Probation Services as the basis for CRAMS. The review included a late addition of the new Windows based ICMS (*Integrated Case Management System*) which was rejected, inter alia, as it would not run on a dumb terminals. The route favoured by ACOP (and by the suppliers) was for a 'new build' program using modern development tools but this had been rejected in 1991 as the development time of two years was too long. It is perhaps ironic that probation services are still waiting for suitable software in 1998.

Doubts about the CRAMS software and about implementation of the NPSISS infrastructure mounted within the areas involved in piloting the software and within service organisations. They surfaced in a number of different ways. The Central Probation Council had concerns over whether the Home Office had acted lawfully in allocating a £95 million project without putting it out to European tender (all projects over 300,000 ECU are supposed to go to tender). The Financial Times in 20 August 1996 headlined an article 'Probation service computer dubbed a disaster', referring to concerns by NAPO (*National Association of Probation Officers*) over the project. There were concerns about over-dependence on a single supplier and poor performance by the supplier. The Home Office itself acknowledged their 'lack of confidence in the performance of Bull and their sub contractors' (1996, Annex D). Perhaps most dramatically of all, in October 1996 a Chief Probation Officer, who was formerly with the Probation Inspectorate, wrote to the Home

Office and to colleagues about being 'bullied and blackmailed' by the Home Office into wasting public money, about being seriously overcharged for equipment and management costs by the suppliers and referring to 'NPSISS rapidly descending into the economics of the madhouse'.

These and other criticisms were noted by this author at the IMISS II conference at Bath University in November 1996 (Colombi, 1997). However the primary focus was on the CRAMS software itself with a detailed critique of problems with version 2, which was found to be unfriendly, poorly designed, inadequate to the tasks and comparing poorly with the ICMS system referred to earlier. It was noted that the suppliers had spoken of their aim to make CRAMS 'as good as ICMS', a remark which threw doubts on the wisdom of rejecting ICMS in the first place, especially given the Home Office repeated preference for 'not reinventing the wheel'. More recently the Chief Probation Officer of Cambridgeshire wrote 'The cause of NPSISS is not advanced by denying the problem, or arguing that it is politically untenable to suggest that the time may be up for CRAMS. In my view, what is untenable - both politically and financially - is to continue to support an expensive software system which will not meet the needs of the Home Office or of area services' (Hughes, 1997).

In an important development, two probation services, Gloucestershire and West Midlands published in 1997 detailed comparative evaluations between version 2 of CRAMS and ICMS, covering cost issues as well as software performance. West Midlands, along with Surrey, was one of the two pilot sites for the CRAMS software. The clear conclusion of both sets of reports is that ICMS offers advantages in the short term and long term both in relation to costs and quality/effectiveness. The final Recommendation of the Gloucestershire report, referring to CRAMS, noted: 'the difficulties with actually using the product the significant training and roll-out time required (and) the high level of need for support anticipated. Gloucestershire Probation Service subscribes to the NPSISS vision and has already moved a considerable way towards achieving it. We are convinced that the introduction of CRAMS would significantly undermine this progress and that business of the service would be hampered not enhanced. Despite the limitations outlined regarding ICMS it is clear that even without further development ICMS would enhance the business of the Service and bring it closer to the NPSISS vision' (Gloucestershire Probation Service, 1997).

In both reports the key financial factor that emerges is the potential savings in training costs through the ICMS system being far simpler to use, better designed and user friendly. The 'start up' savings are identified at £90,000 in Gloucestershire and £108,000 in West Midlands. Given that there are fifty five probation services, the potential savings of moving to ICMS nationally runs to several millions of pounds. There are eight services who are already using ICMS system, although these are mainly smaller services.

The Home Office response to these evaluations has been to say that the newly completed version 3 of CRAMS is much enhanced and overcomes many of the problems of version 2, which was an interim solution. CRAMS 3 is described as 'the user interface will be more like Windows' and with

enhancements that 'will provide much of the functionality requested by users' (Fletcher, 1997). The same source speaks of future versions including 'victim liaison, closer liaison on prison information, bail hostel review, risk assessment and court management' but warns 'there is no alternative to CRAMS in the current business case'. Given the public interest issue involved, we invite the Home Office to commission an immediate independent comparative review between ICMS and CRAMS to ascertain whether there are significant savings to be made by a switch to ICMS. However there is also a substantial case for an full independent review into the implementation of CRAMS and NPSISS. The present author has identified eight questions for such a review (Colombi, 1997).

Progress in Implementation

In 1994 all Probation Services were required to sign up for the NPSISS three year roll-out program which was to run through till 1998. Significant progress has been made, particularly in installation of hardware and networks. At November 1996 it was reported that 3,000 PCs had been installed on 260 sites, with 16 services due to receive version 2 of CRAMS in that financial year. However some services refused to accept CRAMS until software problems are resolved. Version 3 was completed in November 1997 and at the time of writing, has been installed by 16 services. The Home Office progress report of November 1997 shows 7,541 PCs now installed on 675 sites. Thirty one services have been fully installed and eleven services partly installed. Sixteen services have CRAMS installed but only 6 have it 'live'. Hampshire Probation Service reported in November 1997 that 'The software is not yet in a position where Hampshire is prepared to accept it. It doesn't meet our needs and it isn't user friendly. Carrying out the simplest of tasks takes far too long' (Smith, 1997).

For areas that have only had equipment and networks installed there has been substantial expenditure with little tangible gain and unused equipment at a time of staff cutbacks has not helped engender positive staff attitudes towards NPSISS. We can however note that in some areas, the use of Lotus Notes for accessing policy and other practice information via E-mail has been developed.

Beyond CRAMS

National developments

As noted earlier, CRAMS is only one of the NPSISS applications, although far the most important. Other developments on which work is being done includes:

- The Resource Management Information System (RMIS), which predates CRAMS, is a system for providing information on the unit cost of different activities within and between services. Services are required to make quarterly returns to the Home Office. Many services experienced difficulties with its implementation and few found that it provided useful information. The Home Office have refused to reveal the development costs of RMIS and its precursor FMIS.

- EASI database is described as a database of community resources such as hostels, accommodation scheme and drug and alcohol schemes' with over 9,000 current entries. It is managed by the National Association for the Care and Resettlement of Offenders (NACRO) who update the information on a daily basis. Having been piloted in two areas, EASI is being rapidly extended to other probation areas. At present use is restricted to probation services through the NPSISS network but it clearly has potential benefit to other agencies. This could be done via the Internet or through subscription based CD-ROM as with the National Institute of Social Work's *CareData* bibliographic database.
- Offender Gravity Risk Scale (OGRS). This is an assessment tool for assessing the risk of reoffending of particular offenders working from information on criminal history and other key variables. It is now available through the NPSISS network and the results can be attached to the CRAMS record.
- Property database. This is now available to all services for tracking information on probation service premises.
- A national Probation Service name and address book database has been developed which at this stage acts more as distribution facility for activities such as distribution of minutes of meetings, but has the potential to be developed as a full searchable database for example to ascertain the location of particular probation officers.

Local developments

Apart from national developments there are local developments of interest. The following is a sample, but there is perhaps a need for research into this area. The CTI *Resource Guide* publishes information on relevant programs for Probation (<http://www.soton.ac.uk/~chst/direct.htm>).

- **Practice information.** Work has been done in Greater Manchester Probation Service on software to present information on local and national policies such as *National Guidelines for Pre-Sentence Reports* and the local *Equal Opportunities Policy*. In a further step on from simply presenting policy information, their prototype PSR *Quality* uses a computer program as a training tool to enhance standards of report production (this is not yet available but hopefully will be reviewed in this journal in due course).
- **Professional Advice.** The *Child Care Information System* from SSRADU provides information on different aspects of child protection work including research findings, legislation and youth justice. Fitzwilliam Software programs give professional advice to probation officers on working with alcohol and drugs problems.
- **Use with clients.** There are a range of programs designed for direct use with probation clients or clients in similar settings. These include Ferret Maximiser and Lisson Grove Welfare Benefits assessment packages for assessing entitlement to the whole range of welfare benefits. Passada Software programs (written by the

present author) address client issues about Alcohol, Drugs, Driving, Budgeting, Sex Education and Crisis management. Cambridge Probation Service has commissioned a *Modular Life Skills Program* and an *Offence Focused Program*.

- **Assessment programs.** Apart from the Offender Gravity Risk Scale and associated work on Risk of Custody (ROC), there has been relatively development of assessment scales, decision support systems or expert systems specifically for probation practice. There is work in the Belgium Probation Service (Rombaut, 1991) and in the Jerusalem Probation Service (Shapira, 1990) and in related social work fields (Hudson, 1996). This is an area of significant potential, particularly in such areas as work with sex offenders where use of assessment scales is established. The *Assessment Case Research and Evaluation System* developed by the Probation Studies Unit in Oxford is used by Warwickshire Probation Service and elsewhere. We understand that this uses dynamic variables in a way that makes it of potential use as a practice tool but is mainly used for research and management purposes at present.
- **Probation Education and Training.** Programs such as ProCare's *Interpersonal Skills for Social Work and Research Methods for Social Work and Nursing* are written with probation needs in mind. A Child Care program is being developed at the University of Wales in Cardiff. Commercial programs are available for use in such areas as training on Equal Opportunities issues and there is an initiative to develop an Equal Opportunities program specific to the needs of the Criminal Justice System.

Conclusion

Implementation of information technology within the Probation Service is making progress, despite setbacks and problems. In particular the 'roll out' of the hardware and infrastructure is proceeding rapidly, despite the concerns over costs. There are also exciting developments both within the formal NPSISS project and external to it. However the CRAMS software remains as the fundamental problem and is not one that will go away. NPSISS increasingly looks like a production of Hamlet with Yorick playing the lead. The criticisms of CRAMS in this paper are not made lightly, but in the knowledge of dedicated work by the staff involved. Implementing any new major project will run into problems. Nevertheless we must be concerned that not only are large amounts of public money involved but the future effectiveness of the Probation Service is at risk because of wrong software decisions. It is time to recognise that fact and seek to regain the enthusiasm for NPSISS that greeted its arrival. Technology has a great deal to offer but the consequences of persevering with an ineffective and unsatisfactory client system at the heart of NPSISS will cause lasting damage to the probation service.

References

- Colombi D (1997) 'Critical Perspectives on the Probation Service Client Information System' in Gould N and Moultrie K *Effective Policy, Planning and Implementation*. Ashgate, Aldershot.
- Colombi D (1994) *The Probation Service and Information Technology*. Avebury, Aldershot.
- CTI Human Services (1996) 'Resource Guide'. Special issue of *New Technology in the Human Services*. Vol 8, No 4 Centre for Human Service Technology, University of Southampton.
- Gloucestershire Probation Service (1997) *A Comparison Study of the Usability of CRAMS and ICMS and Business Case Assessment*.
- Fletcher, A. (1997) 'CRAMS Version 3 ushers in a whole new era' in *Networking. The NPSISS Newsletter from the Probation Service and Bull.* November 1997.
- Home Office (1996) *National Probation Service Information Systems Strategy: Implementation Guidance: Review of Infrastructure Procurement and CRAMS Implementation Plan*. Probation Circular 18/1996.
- Home Office (1993a) *National Probation Service Information Systems Strategy and Appendix*.
- Home Office (1993b) *CRAMS Requirements and Evaluation Study*.
- Hudson W (1996) 'Professional Practice for the 21st Century: Information Implications'. In Steyaert J (Ed), *Information Technology and Human Services, More Than Computers?*, Netherlands Institute for Care and Welfare (NIZW), Utrecht. ISBN 90 5050 372 1.
- Hughes J (1997) 'In my VIEW' in *Networking. The NPSISS Newsletter from the Probation Service and Bull.* November 1997.
- Parker G (1996) *Probation service computer dubbed a disaster*. Financial Times. 20th August 1996.
- Rombaut J (1992) 'Plan for computerisation of the Belgian Penal Social Service', *New Technology in the Human Services*, Vol 6, No. 1 Spring 1992.
- Shapira (1990) 'Computerised decision technology in Social Service: Decision support system improves decision practice in Youth Probation Service', *International Journal of Sociology and Social Policy*, Vol. 10.
- Smith J (1997) Probation cash to be used to buy computer. *The News* (Portsmouth), 11/97. West Midlands Probation Service (1997) *ICMS/CRAMS 2.5 Evaluation* West Sussex Probation Service (1997) *Annual Report 1996/7*. WSPS, Chichester.

Practice & Policy Reports

Introducing Information Systems in Social Services - the LACCS experience

Keith Moultrie

Introduction

The introduction of a new computer system in a social services department is often an activity which everyone agrees is important, but for which no one actually wants to take responsibility. As a result, the transition to the new system turns out to be more painful, time consuming, and ultimately less successful than was planned.

Since its inception in 1989, The Social Services Research and Development Unit (SSRADU) at the University of Bath, has been working with departments throughout the United Kingdom to introduce computer systems to social work and, over the years, has developed an approach which tries to balance the perspective of information technology specialists with an understanding of the human impact of changes in working practice. This paper summarises some of the lessons SSRADU has learnt and considers the factors which influence successful implementation.

The Problem

Anyone looking at the history of social work and information management over recent years may be forgiven for believing that the two activities have not yet been successfully integrated. Writers including Kerslake (1996), Steyaert (1993) and Glastonbury (1985) have considered the issue generally, and at an operational level, comments from some recent reports give a flavour of the problems:

'The review has shown that 17.5% (397) of the young people whose names appeared on the registers of the four establishments between 1970 and 1994, no file could be traced. Information from other local authorities indicates that this is not an unusual figure' (Gloucestershire County Council, 1996)

'Social services departments' own information systems also need to be improved to support the efficient and effective delivery of services. Departments have experienced difficulties in implementing such systems in ways which support operational systems and, when information technology is used, are not dominated by technical considerations. The quality of management information is variable and often not of use to managers in their decision making.' (SSI, 1997)

This picture is repeated daily in our consultancy practice:

For example a social worker recently commented.

'Two months after I joined the department I was given my password to the client index system. I looked up all twenty clients, and each of them had information which was wrong or out of date. It would have taken too long to sort it, so I just haven't used it since.'

Difficulties are not just confined to problems with old systems, as this observation from a Looking After Children (LAC) project officer suggests:

'We've had the LAC paper system for eighteen months now, and a recent review of files showed that we have about a 50% completion rate on the forms.'

Keith Moultrie is deputy director of SSRADU (Social Services Research and Development Unit).

Contact him at:

SSRADU
New Church
Henry Street
Bath
BA1 1JR
UK

Tel: 01225 484088

Fax: 01225 330313

Email: ssradu@bath.ac.uk

Web:

<http://www.bath.ac.uk/Centres/SSRADU/>

The effects of poor management information have an impact upon the efficiency and effectiveness of the department, as this Assistant Director's comments show:

'It takes us about eight months to do the Department of Health 903 Return (the annual return to government concerning children looked after); two months to find the files and six months to complete all the corrections'

The problems and difficulties in this area are legion, and despite attempts by individual officers to tackle the difficulties with individual systems, there are very few authorities who have what could be described as an information culture.

The reasons for the problem

There are many reasons for the current difficulties which underpin the management of information in social services, including:

- A strong social work culture of individual case responsibility and ownership of records. This emphasis upon the importance of the social workers personal relationship with their client has carried with it a corresponding denial of the role of worker as agent of the department. Case records are often poorly kept, with the minimum of input, and very little attention is paid in training to the need to provide quality records to help departments manage their services.
- Old fashioned information systems which are cumbersome and less user friendly than staff are used to in their own homes. Departments have not maintained the investment in information systems since the spending which accompanied the introduction of community care in the early nineties.
- Large amounts of information collected about clients are often a repetition of other records elsewhere in the department and are not presented in a way which is easily digested. No one who has worked in a social services department can fail to recognise the image of a clerk struggling to carry a pile of ill assorted files for a single well known family from one office to another as the case is transferred to yet another worker. These 'information dustbins' are a graphic reminder of the wealth of information collected which is never effectively analysed, and rarely makes any contribution to the planning of services. Social workers are required to store this information, quite rightly, in case of subsequent need, but paper and computer systems provide no help in subsequently making key aspects of the information available to others.
- Professionals experience systems as providing little or no help to them in their day to day practice. Improvements which might be expected, such as easy access to accurate information about service provision, material which can be accessed to help in case decision making or work with clients, is, although possible to obtain using most modern systems, yet to be introduced in most departments.

Perhaps it is hardly surprising, given the context in which information systems are introduced that the initial attitude on the part of many practitioners is one of overt or covert hostility, and that those responsible for the introduction of the system resort to an attitude of grim determination '...they may not want it, but they're going to get it anyway!'

Information management in the future - why it is worth persevering?

At SSRADU we believe that effective information management as part of a comprehensive approach to performance management will be seen as perhaps the single most crucial management priority over the next few years. To achieve this will require a significant change in culture and practice because unless departments can be confident that the information upon which they base decisions is accurate, timely and relevant, then their attempts to effectively manage the performance of their department will be fatally flawed. Achieving this cannot simply be left to IT officers, however technically proficient. It is a significant strategic management task to introduce systems and practice which can offer improvements in:

- Accessibility across the department to details about individual clients and service users.
- The production of customised reports which give management information to inform the development of services for a population.
- The ability of managers to monitor the performance of staff against pre-set standards.
- The quality of information which is readily available to practitioners to support them in their work with clients.
- The range of functions within systems to reduce the administrative burden faced by departments in keeping their materials and records up to date.

Our experience suggests that whilst the need to invest in hardware and software is perceived and in some instances carried through, it is crucial for the success of these initiatives that at least the equivalent degree of thought and investment goes into planning the implementation of such systems and in particular, how to ensure that the right data is captured in its entirety. This is an agenda which needs to be the responsibility of a coalition of practitioners, line-managers and support staff across the department.

Our approach to implementation

When SSRADU work on systems introduction, whether a proprietary system or a bespoke development, we encourage the department to start with the following assumptions:

- Purchasing a system is easy, making it work is difficult.
- It will require behavioural change by information users.
- Implementation should be slow and measured.
- It needs detailed planning by practitioners and managers.

Even where a system looks relatively simple to implement, like many PC based systems, the hidden impact can potentially be huge. When a department buys a new system, it is actually investing in a new way of working, which is likely to effect well established patterns of behaviour throughout the department. This is especially true given the earlier comments about the paucity of good quality information practice. In our experience the introduction of a new system will have more impact on day to day practice than any number of external reports or strategic plans. Therefore, it is essential that the implementation of the system is considered in detail, and the human impact of practice changes are taken into account.

Our approach to implementation with LACCS

SSRADU commenced the introduction of the Looking After Children Computer System (LACCS) with authorities in 1996. LACCS is based upon the Department of Health's Looking After Children: Good Parenting; Good Outcomes recording system, and is a comprehensive child care monitoring system. It combines a complete Essential Information Record system, a means of fully or partially word processing key documents, a management information tool for compiling department wide reports and a programme for producing the annual Department of Health SSDA 903 child care statistical return (DOH, 1995). Although the computer system itself is comparatively small and specialised, the impact that it can have on the working practice of a department is very significant. SSRADU's practice, therefore, is that in addition to offering a relatively inexpensive software licence, the accumulated experience of departments who have made the changes in working practice is made available to each user through practical guidance and implementation support as part of the licence arrangement.

Over the last year and a half the Unit, with the help and support of our clients, has built up a four stage implementation process which helps a local authority to consider and plan for the impact of the system:

1. **Initial demonstration(s) with stakeholders within the department.** Our initial discussions with departments, in addition to demonstrating the specific software, focus upon the information management issues which are being addressed, and consider these issues from a range of perspectives, including managers, practitioners, administrators, IT specialists and other support staff
2. **In-depth implementation planning before software release.** Again involving the full range of stakeholders in the exercise, we use a checklist approach to cover the wide range of implementation issues to be considered and acted upon before a system can be introduced. It is crucial in our experience that all of the key decision makers are involved in this process so that a clear consensus can be developed about the operation of the system

For LACCS, some of the issues which are worked through in this process include:

- Clarifying the basic policy goals, practice and managerial objectives of the system

- Establishing the current baseline for collecting, storing and using information on children looked after.
- Agreeing the hardware requirements and allocation, including the functionality of PC's, printers and communications links.
- Establishing the purpose, feasibility and cost of linking LACCS with other information systems within the department.
- Deciding on the advisability and remit for piloting projects.
- Identifying who will be the system users, how information will flow across the department, and the level of access for different groups of staff.
- Agreeing the content, frequency and responsibility for the production of system reports.
- Planning the training and support needed to ensure that the system is used properly within the department.
- Clarifying the link between the system and the LAC paper forms.
- Confirming the process to be used for initial data loading and subsequent data interchange and merging.
- Developing evaluation and review processes to ensure that operational difficulties can be addressed quickly, and that the impact of the system can be effectively evaluated.

3. **Formal confirmation of decisions reached.** In addition to undertaking the planning process, it is essential that the department confirm this in a formal document which commits the department to an implementation plan. Without this commitment, made by the most senior of managers, it is easy for any implementation to get forced down the agenda by less significant but more urgent pieces of work.
4. **Regular progress checking and helpline support.** Because information systems are catalysts for practice change, it is never possible to plan entirely for all the implications of implementation. We find it important to pro-actively maintain contact with departments as they go through the implementation process, and to pick up on practice difficulties as well as any system problems. These progress checks provide us with valuable information about wider child care management issues and give us the opportunity to share approaches that work with other authorities.

Although SSRADU's systematic approach to implementation introduces common standards to the implementation of LACCS across local authorities, there are inevitably some which are more successful in practice than others. We have identified a number of factors which we think have influence over the success of implementation.

What seems to work best ?

Based upon our work over the last two years, the following elements appear to us to characterise the implementation activities of departments which most successfully introduce information systems such as LACCS:

- **Clear senior management objectives for the system.** LACCS, like any other organisation tool, has to be seen to have a strategic purpose and value for the department. Without that perspective LACCS, or any other information system, is merely a mild diversion, rather than a significant contributor to performance management.
- **Public statement of intention.** Information systems have to be planned for and a commitment promised if the changes in practice which they bring are to be worthwhile. Formal statements, such as children's services plans, are very public ways of demonstrating a firm commitment
- **An assigned project manager from the practitioner's side and practitioner involvement in the project team.** Authorities who demonstrate their commitment to systems such as LACCS usually appoint a line manager from within the department's children's services to lead the project. Enthusiastic involvement from such a person seems to have far more impact upon fellow practitioners than the leadership by one of the department's IT specialists, however talented and able.
- **An assigned and interested systems specialist** is nevertheless crucial to the success in practice of the system, and it is essential that implementation takes account of the skills, knowledge and attitude changes which systems specialists may need to make to be able to support the system effectively.
- **In-depth consultation with frequent users of the system** to ensure that they are clear about how their information processes will be effected, and have had the opportunity to contribute to the design of new working practice. In many ways this is the group of staff that have least 'pay off' from PC based systems as bringing data together from disparate sites can be a time consuming task.
- **Pilot to win.** Departments which have greatest success with implementation use pilot projects to test out changes in practice, once they have committed themselves to a system. However, piloting does not mean simply dump the software with a team to try out or 'play with'. Piloting means being clear about what exactly do you want to test, i.e. entry of data, how does the system perform with high volumes of information, reports, etc?
- **Ongoing learning and support for users** is another factor which characterises the most successful departments. This includes formal training sessions as appropriate, but perhaps more importantly, is particularly successful when staff, often experienced administrators, are trained to be on-the-job mentors and guides for their colleagues. The workplace is very often where most effective learning of IT skills takes place.

- Finally, successful departments commit themselves to identifying **quality standards for information input** onto the system and to regular audit of systems to ensure that those standards are being met. This ensures that the department doesn't just introduce change, but it also makes that change stick. In the case of LACCS this may also mean quality standards for completion of information on the paper based forms.

Conclusion

It is no longer possible to say that information systems are not smart enough to be of real use in practice and performance management in social services departments. Systems like LACCS are showing that it is possible to develop smart, user friendly databases. However, the success of these vehicles for information storage and analysis is totally dependent on the culture and environment in which they are implemented. Without proper support and management computer systems can be every bit as fallible as the old paper based files. Changing that means putting knowledge acquisition and information driven practice much higher up the social services agenda.

More information about the work of SSRADU, or about the Looking After Children Computer System, can be obtained by writing to us at The New Church, Henry Street, Bath, BA1 1JR, or telephone (UK) 01225 484088.

References

- Department of Health (1995) *Looking After Children, Management and Implementation Guide*. HMSO, London.
- Glastonbury, B. (1985) *Computers in Social Work*, Macmillan, London.
- Gloucestershire County Council (1996) *In Care Contacts - a review of over 2,000 files of young people in residential care*. Gloucestershire County Council, Gloucester.
- Kerslake, A. (1996) 'Information Management: Beyond Information Technology', *Information Management in Social Services*, Avebury, Aldershot.
- Social Services Inspectorate (1997) *Better Management, Better Care. The Sixth Annual Report of the Chief Inspector*. The Stationery Office, London.
- Steyaert, J. (1993) 'Client Information Systems and their Built-In Values' *Human Welfare and Technology*, Van Gorcum, Assen, The Netherlands.

Case Based Learning: Towards a computer tool for learning with cases

Albert Visser

Historical background

In the last fifteen years social work teaching in the Netherlands has made a significant shift from concentrating on learning social, political and economic theories, towards more field practice and more learning from client cases. The former was rather abstract as social work clients do not easily fit into the theoretical situation of a classroom. In my department more and more teachers started working with summarized or even extensive client cases in their teaching. In a meeting of innovators from two educational departments, we discovered that each of us used their own more or less implicit models. Then we decided that a more systematic approach would not only improve the effectiveness of learning with cases, but also would it improve the quality of learning processes in adding a systematic dimension to the more implicit and intuitive social work skills.

So the project was started with three main goals:

- developing a model for working more systematically with client cases
- building a database with client cases
- using ICT for direct communication with field practice.

This first phase of the project has dealt with the first two goals, which are described below.

Learning social work with cases

a. Why cases?

Although part-time study is possible, social work students in the Netherlands are generally full-time students. Thus they are unable to reflect or draw from practical experience, especially during the first two years of study. This is the most important reason for introducing a large number of client case descriptions and giving students assignments working on the problem cases. It is important that students acquire problem solving skills, not only by trying to develop a problem solving strategy themselves, but also by discussing it with fellow students and teachers and by practicing it in role playing situations. Reflection is a part of this.

b. Elements of a case.

So if case descriptions become an important part of the educational process, what should a case description look like?

We defined it as follows: a case is a description of a real-life situation, mostly a problem situation that a student might meet when working as a social worker. It contains information from one or more sources, information which the student needs to develop a problem solving strategy.

Each cases we use has the following elements:

- it is a real life situation, that could be met in practice placements;
- it is a multi aspect client situation: psychosocial, financial, interpersonal or formal, legal;
- the problem solving strategy has elements like: research, coordination, organisation and report;

Albert Visser is ICT consultant at Hogeschool van Utrecht, one of higher education social work training schools in The Netherlands.

Contact him at:

Hogeschool van Utrecht,
Faculteit Sociaal Agogische
Opleidingen,
PO BOX 85397
NL 3508 AJ Utrecht
Netherlands

Tel: +30 2585231

Fax: +30 2585205

Email: A.Visser@FSAO.HvU.NL

- the helping process can be of different nature: prevention, cure, etc.;
- the amount of information provided varies: is the amount of information sufficient or is extra information needed; is it relevant or irrelevant?
- a problem definition has to be formed and checked with the client or teacher. This may need to be refined at a later date. Feedback on decisions necessary;
- more than one problem solving strategy can be described and also needs to be checked;
- learning objectives of each case have to be described by the teacher.

These elements are present in each case, which makes it complex and also more comparable with professional practice.

c. Types of cases.

Theoretical descriptions distinguish three type of cases:

- the case history, in which the situation of the client is described, as well as the problem and a possible solution; The student has to decide whether the solution was the right one or not;
- the problem case, in which just the situation and the problem situation are described. The student has to develop problem solving strategies;
- the complex case in which the case is offered as a big basket of unstructured information. The student has to analyse the information, to define the problem situation and to formulate problem solving strategies.

We decided to work with cases from the latter type, which is complex but more realistic and comparable with professional practice.

The structured approach

In the curricula every learning activity is based on learning objectives. The structured model for case handling consists of 6 phases, described below.

Phase 1: Overview

This phase is to get an overview of the client situation. The student learns to go through the available information, to order the unstructured bulk of information, to establish the situation of the client and their social surroundings and to select relevant questions for the helping relationship.

Phase 2: Assessment

In this phase the student learns to assess the problem situation. It is important to check whether the problem situation can be handled by the social worker, whether it is eligible within the role of the organisation, whether it should be referred to other more relevant organisations or social workers. The student learns to judge client situations within the context of their social environment.

Phase 3: Analysis

The phase of analysis urges the student to analyse the available information, whether it is sufficient to formulate goals for the helping process, to distinguish which factors are opportunities and which are threats in reaching the ultimate goals of the helping relationship.

Phase 4: Strategy

Now a strategy has to be formulated, with short and long term goals. The available means have to be established and a plan for action has to be described. Plans have to be made identifying who does what, when and how.

Phase 5: Actions

Concrete actions take place in professional practice. In the learning process this can also be an occasion for role-playing between students in working groups.

Phase 6: Evaluation

Evaluations have to be made of goal attainment. In case of negative results the process cycle can be made once again.

This may seem all rather mechanistic. The helping process in real practice hardly ever seems to have this elaborate structure. Nevertheless it is important that students learn how complicated the helping process is and how they can systematically help clients in solving their problems.

In this structured approach they also learn that on many occasions social workers have to make decisions. They have to decide whether they have enough information, whether they take the case or not, how to use available resources etc. Many of these dilemmas are discussed when the case handling process is evaluated with students and teachers.

The role of ICT

So far we have been dealing with learning to handle a client case through a structured approach. The next step is the use of information and communication technology (ICT) in the learning process.

a. The database

The structured approach can very easily be transferred into a database system. If all client data is put into a database system, why don't we use a client information system for this purpose? The main difference between a client information system and the CBL-database is that the latter serves the purpose of education. It stresses the importance of keeping the right order in the process. It also has many links to curriculum information. It does not have to contain management information other than information for the teacher on how the student moved through the case.

Another important feature of the database is that students can search the fields of the database: they can search for similar cases in the database to learn from earlier

experiences. Although this sounds like case-based reasoning it is not that: the reasoning is in the student, not in the software. So the student has to search and compare and make his or her own conclusions.

The database system can also contain audio and video data.

b. data communication.

With the large scale access of Internet and the WWW it is easy to communicate electronically. Client information can be put in the database by practitioners or by students doing their practice placement. Students in universities can act as a 'think tank' for social work practice and suggest solutions for the specific client case. This semi-direct way of contact between university and practice both brings the actual practice in the learning process and offers an extra chance for practice to profit from expertise in universities. In the next stages of the project this option will be explored.

Changing roles

Using this method for structured learning with cases is also changing roles for both students and teachers:

Students will acquire:

- a more active attitude. They cannot just consume theory or absorb knowledge passively, but they have to be active in solving cases.
- more contacts with field practice when Internet communications commence. Until then field practice will be more realistic through inputs from students and teachers.
- more interactions with fellow students, as this favours working in small groups and getting feedback from fellow students.

Also for teachers there are changes:

They provide less direct information; information is in the software or easy accessible through the Internet. Teachers are becoming more and more the organisers of the learning process.

They have to fit the case-handling modules into the curriculum, see that relevant theories are learned before students are confronted with client cases. They also have an important role in the elaboration of the contents of the cases. Teachers stimulate the integration of knowledge and skills into the professional attitudes of the students.

Conclusions

So far the project has led to the development of a theoretical framework for handling client cases. A process model is now available and ready for testing together with a prototype for the multi media database. Teachers now are working together to fill the database with relevant client cases. Small groups of students will start to work with the database in a structured way. They will learn to use ICT as a tool in their learning process. They will also learn a systematic approach for working with clients.

We nevertheless are all aware of the fact that when in practice the students will need to develop a more loose, intuitive and implicit style in their professional behaviour.

References (in English):

van Vilsteren, P P M *Case methodology in distance education*, Dutch Open University Heerlen.

Visser A, (1993) *Case Based Learning: a Virtual Practice* in Glastonbury B (Ed.) *Dreams and Realities Information Technology in the Human Services* Stakes, Finland.

Computers in Child Care: conversion of a children's resource to multimedia and preliminary test results.

Les Cowan

Abstract

Use of computers in child care has long been a subject of debate in academic and professional circles. Despite considerable supposed benefits and applicability, computer based therapeutic resources for children are still not in widespread use. Reasons for this are explored, including commercial factors, hardware and cost issues and attitudes within the caring professions. Various developments now make therapeutic software production more realistic. One such development converting an existing children's resource to computer is described and early test results outlined.

Introduction

Developing computer applications for use in child care seems to have been 'work in progress' for a long time now. Despite considerable interest and research however, the goal of having an effective range of computer based resources in regular use still seems a long way off. Is this because the concept has been tried and found wanting, not properly tried or is it still somehow struggling through an embryonic stage hindered by other factors? The attraction of computer based resources both to children themselves and to interested practitioners seems such that the problem is clearly worth trying to explore.

There is no doubt that effective therapeutic interventions can take place with children using computers. Play is a fundamental way of learning about the world and trying out behavioural strategies. Playing via a computer application can stand well alongside other types of reality modelling. It therefore seems reasonable to apply this principle to areas where real life behaviour is causing concern. Instead of simply repeating an authority message or hoping to prevail by abstract reasoning, the child care practitioner could use a computer game or simulation to help a child explore their feelings, test out options and discover the consequences. Various studies illustrate how this has been attempted with some success (Resnick, 1994).

Alternatively, a computer simulation could be used either in one to one work or group settings to stimulate discussion and apply learning at a more cognitive level. Topics such as drug taking, bullying or living in a family other than your own, which are not easy to talk about in conventional ways, would seem appropriate candidates for computer treatment.

Despite academic and professional interest, however, the apparent logic of such an approach and encouraging experimental results, therapeutic programs are not in regular use in child care and remain something of a minority interest. This discussion aims to consider three aspects of the 'computers in child care' problem. Firstly what factors in the human services have contributed to a lack of computer based resources as compared with education, learning, leisure and indeed almost every other aspect of the life of children today. Secondly, can established and useful resources and techniques be implemented on computer assuming there is a benefit in doing so? Thirdly, what sort of results might be obtained from the deployment of such a resource in practice.

Les Cowan is Senior Assistant Director in Orkney Social Services. He is a partner in Information PLUS a company developing multimedia applications for social care, training and working with children.

Contact him at:

*Information PLUS
3, Hill of Heddle
Finstown
Orkney
KW17 2LH
Scotland
UK*

Tel: +44 (0) 1865 761334

Email: informationplus@compuserve.com

Factors affecting use of computers in child care

Even if a computer based approach were no more effective than other techniques, the fact that children want to work on computer, seem to have a lengthened attention span and view computer use as a positive experience would in itself be a good argument for further exploration. Evidence is however that it is both fun *and* productive (Resnick, *ibid*) - maybe what we should expect since what works will have an element of fun (because it is successful) and what is fun is much more likely to work.

Despite these advantages, using computer applications in child care is still a minority interest rare enough to merit special media coverage (Guardian, 1997) rather than a normal part of child care. Although academics and some practitioners have been talking for a long time about the possibilities, the lack of good specialist software, the lack of hardware in practice settings, a lack of computer confidence within the profession and still some residual negative feelings about dehumanising machines, all contribute to the promised breakthrough never quite happening. For each of these negative factors however, it appears that there may be some remedy in sight.

Firstly, social workers are themselves more computer literate and accepting of new technology than previously. Although there is still a quantum leap between looking up client details on a terminal and using creative applications with children, computers are now more physically prevalent in the workplace and being used by professional staff for real and useful tasks. Newly qualified social workers are also more familiar with aspects of computer use, partly as a result of computer based teaching and learning initiatives. Social workers as citizens are also themselves caught up in social trends making the PC a common consumer item for 'average' households. Unlike in the 'micro' revolution of the 80's, however, these are PCs adhering to industry standards and having usable software, reasonable amounts of memory and storage space, doing serious tasks and hence perhaps less likely to end up under the bed with the Sinclair Spectrum.

As a result of these workplace and social changes it is therefore becoming less common to hear explicit anti-computer attitudes in the profession. There are still occasional voices raised along the lines of 'this goes against everything I stand for ...' (Stutz, 1996), however we are gradually moving towards a position whereby it is reasonable to expect that computer applications should be explored for therapeutic as well as administrative tasks.

Despite changing attitudes however, resources - both in software and hardware - are still quite hard to find. This brings us to the most fundamental problem - a lack of specialist software designed and developed for the purpose. This is in turn a feature of a lack of software developers writing it, and this is a feature of a lack of a perceived market. In turn, the market does not yet exist because computers are not yet being widely used in

practice because - there are not enough compelling specialist applications to make it worthwhile.

While this seems a daunting vicious circle, it is not unknown in computing history. In fact, the Apple II, IBM PC and the Macintosh - the three most successful personal computers ever produced - have all been hung up on the very same dilemma until a compelling application came along that sold the hardware, created the market, changed working practices, sold more software and more or less led to where we are today.

In computer use in social work, we may therefore be standing just prior to the birth of a market and a new way of working. Social workers are more ready to consider using computers with children and children are ready to respond. Equipment is not expensive and is of a high specification. Multimedia has changed the face of software, introducing a plethora of high quality 'edutainment' and learning packages for children and making development tools much more readily available to creative developers. What we are finally waiting for is a range of high quality therapeutic applications needed to start the ball rolling.

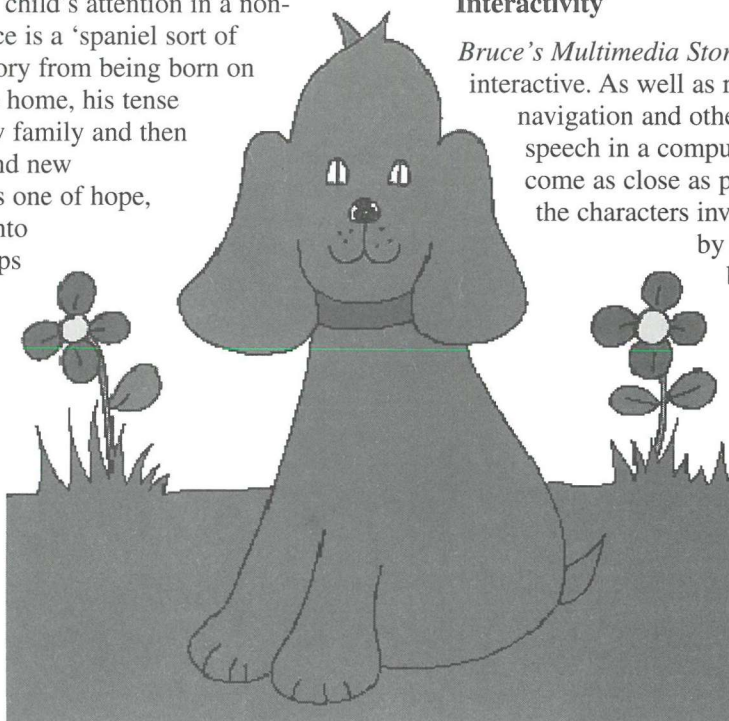
Child care resources on computer

Given this embryonic stage, it would certainly be helpful to start with an established and successful children's resource which might benefit from a computer implementation. This might be an effective bridge to new ways of working by carrying forward known and reliable resources child care professionals already have confidence in. *Bruce's Story* (Thom and MacIver, 1986) is certainly one such. With sales of over 20,000 in ten years, it is probably the best selling children's resource in UK human services. The format of the book is also very suitable for multimedia computerisation.

A relatively simple story aimed at a 6-10 year old readership (though children outside that range might also benefit depending on needs) is accompanied by bright and clear illustrations opening up the possibility of using a child's voice to read the story, introducing animation into the illustrations and somehow integrating the paper worksheets packaged with the book into a more interactive form. The topic of coping with the loss and dislocation of losing a family is sadly perennial. Following close collaboration with the authors, preliminary discussion and demonstration to child care workers and two years of evolution, *Bruce's Multimedia Story* has recently finished development and gone into testing.

So what is *Bruce's Multimedia Story* and what can it do for children that the printed copy can't? Firstly multimedia can only be useful as applied to effective resources or concepts. There is no point in computerising where the basic concepts are not sound. *Bruce's Story* has been an effective resource for children (at least judging by sales)

because it engages the child's attention in a non-threatening manner. Bruce is a 'spaniel sort of dog' who recounts his story from being born on the farm, having to leave home, his tense time of waiting for a new family and then the joy of a new home and new relationships. His story is one of hope, fear, anxiety, travelling into the unknown, relationships made and lost, hurt and disappointment and eventual progress towards recovery - many of the elements common to the lives of children looked after by the statutory child care agencies. At multiple points through the story children are encouraged to reflect on Bruce's experience and relate it to their own.



Interactivity

Bruce's Multimedia Story is also designed to be highly interactive. As well as responding to the player in all the navigation and other user controls, the use of natural speech in a computer application allows children to come as close as possible to interacting directly with the characters involved. Not only is the story 'told' by Bruce, but clicking on Bruce's bones, scattered around the pages, pop up secret messages, also 'spoken' by Bruce, inviting the child to reflect on what has just happened in the story, relate it to their own experience and respond directly with their own recollections and feelings. This replaces the worksheets of the original book and is designed to increase and develop the feelings of identification from which much of the benefit of the story flows. It is no longer the caring but ultimately third party adult, but Bruce himself who has also been through painful experiences engaging the child and inviting their thoughts and feelings.

Bruce's Story is effective by engaging children with a character they can relate to, building an affinity between Bruce and the reader and using this to help them think about changes in their own lives and relate what has happened to them to what has happened to Bruce. Secondly it carries a message that change can be positive and that losing a birth family does not mean that you can never be loved or love again. Along with the printed version come a set of worksheets allowing children to respond in writing back to Bruce with their own life stories.

The computer version has been deliberately kept very close to the original, but differs key respects. These can be characterised as control, interactivity and play.

Control

Firstly, all of *Bruce's Multimedia Story* is under the child's control. All basic functions are very simply implemented and are mouse rather than keyboard driven. While perhaps not an obvious issue for adults, the question of control is fundamental to the life of children receiving professional care. So much is out of their control including decision making and often their own behaviour, that issues of control in the therapeutic relationship can be highly significant.

Secondly, while in general children do love and enjoy story books, not all children do so as uniformly or to the extent that confidently literate adults might suppose. For some children, reading is not an easy natural task. Taking in information though the written word can be a stressful and often unsuccessful activity. In *Bruce's Multimedia Story* clicking on any story text has that read to you in an age appropriate voice. The child is therefore able to follow the story perfectly well without having to deal with the written words, while still retaining control.

Play

In any therapeutic interaction however, there is still likely to be pain involved. To counterbalance this, child care workers turn to a variety of fun activities to help the process. In *Bruce's Multimedia Story* the fun comes in the same package as the helping process. The program is peppered with animations, music and sound to discover, play with and explore at the same time as working through the harder lessons of sadness and loss.

Testing

While a great deal about therapeutic computer use with children seems applicable and natural based on children's affinity with using computer applications and the logic of applying this to the helping relationship, it is still essential to try to evaluate what is going on, and whether, how and why it works. For this reason *Bruce's Multimedia Story* has been located in a number of test locations and feedback obtained on its usefulness in genuine therapeutic interactions.

Preliminary Results from Practice

Childcare Agency A

This agency has so far used *Bruce's Multimedia Story* only with one child but has done so quite intensively and has provided extensive feedback obtained by interview with the child care worker involved. This is therefore reported in some detail.

Use of the program involved an eight year old boy, Tony (name changed), who had already experienced fifteen different living situations and at the time of the work was in foster care. Tony's life experiences have left him with a lot of anger, confusion and feelings of guilt. Tony felt that his unstable family situation and frequent moves were somehow his fault because he was a 'bad boy'. Use of Bruce's Multimedia Story formed part of overall life history work conducted on a one to one basis by a residential child care worker. The care worker has some minimal experience of using a computer in administration but none as a therapeutic resource. Previous tools and techniques had included drawing, writing stories and using pictures assembled into a life storybook

The total work has extended over more than 12 months out of which Bruce's Multimedia Story was in use for about three months. Part of the worker's remit is to help Tony face his feelings and understand them. It has been hoped that this would enable him to be able to express his feelings and ask the questions he needed to ask, which the care worker would then try to answer as honestly and sensitively she could.

General findings from the test have been positive and fall into three main categories relating to attitude, therapeutic value and overall outcome.

Attitude

Firstly the use of a multimedia computer program with a strong play element has been found to be helpful in relation to the child's overall attitude to the work, appearing to facilitate a sense of enjoyment and an ability to relax and participate. Prior to using the program in an explicitly therapeutic way, the care worker began with a number of sessions simply devoted to reading the story and playing with the animations and sound effects. This then led naturally to more therapeutic use:

'... It gave him time to gain confidence enough to ask. When he was playing he was sufficiently relaxed to ask questions - they just came out in the game ...'

The care worker reported that Tony obviously enjoyed the play element of the program and was:

'... so eager to get going every time. He was more interested because it was a computer game ...'

Not surprisingly this was also a help to the care worker who reported that previously she had found it difficult to find different things to hold Tony's attention. The play element even seems to have given Tony sufficient confidence to allow the sessions to broaden to include his foster carer and foster carer's older son. The care worker reports this to have changed the nature of sessions making them more relaxed and less threatening until 'everybody could join in'. This finding in relation to attitude relates to effects reported by Resnick and Sherer (Resnick *ibid*, p7):

'The potential for using computerised games in the human services may be great. People like to play and while they play they are more relaxed and therefore more accessible.'

In relation to one specific computer game used in a therapeutic setting they comment:

*'The game also provides the opportunity to develop a good relationship with the therapist by creating a 'non-threatening atmosphere for therapy' (Resnick, *ibid*, p19).*

Therapeutic Value

Perhaps the major finding in relation to how Bruce's Multimedia Story contributed to the therapeutic content of life story work has already been partly referred to. Involvement in a multimedia computer program seems to have so engaged Tony's interest and attention that his thoughts, feelings and questions naturally surfaced in the course of play. The care worker has also reported that Tony was able to relate well to Bruce, helped by the use of the speech in recorded sound clips and animation, all of which helped to bring Bruce to life:

'He was able to relate to being very like Bruce. He naturally made the connection - that was like me, that happened to me ... there was so much he could relate to.'

The way in which Tony was able to relate to Bruce seems to have naturally brought out his feelings and questions and helped the care worker to be open and to give him important information in return. This identification also had the unexpected effect of jogging Tony's memory and bringing back smells, sounds and feelings relating to experiences paralleling those of Bruce in the story. One point in the story about feeling afraid brought a particularly clear response from Tony and led to discussion of a range of incidents which had left him feeling afraid. This in turn gave the care worker a valuable insight into how Tony saw these events and what sense he had been able to make of them:

'Memories flooded back - you could see that it hurt but he had the confidence to talk about it.'

The care worker was able to use Tony's opening up to challenge some of his fantasies about the past, for example that it was his fault that his Mum and her boyfriend argued so much.

'It has changed his attitude to himself. He no longer looks on himself as bad..'

Tony's openness and questioning about his past also had the effect of prompting the care worker to do further research and search back in records to answer the many questions Tony was now posing.

The care worker has already been quoted in relation to the value of an interesting resource Tony looked forward to

using. The fact that it presented a structured format also seems to have been useful. The program made it clear where he had stopped at the end of a session. It was enough to do one page in a session if it was explored properly. Oodles of information came out.

While a good computer resource would certainly share many features with the same resource in a more physical format such as a book or game, the facility children have with computers and the fact that only one person can use the mouse at a time clearly changes the balance of control in computer based therapeutic work. For children who have experienced so little control over their lives and circumstances this can be an extremely important issue as has been referred to above. In relation to this the care worker comments

'Tony kept me right. He used to laugh if I got anything wrong ... He was helping me.'

Clearly Tony was enjoying the confidence that comes from control which in turn seems to have been helpful in the overall therapeutic experience.

Overall Outcome

In evaluating outcomes, it is important to emphasize that the program tackles a particular child care issue and took its place in a planned programme of work with specific goals and methods. Bruce's Multimedia Story added to rather than replacing or dominating other methods.

'It consolidated other work. It was important to use it at the right stage ... It was part of a process of helping him talk about his feelings ... He was at the right stage to make use of the program.'

The program was also subject to the same constraints as other ways of working.

'Some days we got a lot more done than others'

Overall however it seems that a computer based resource can have something to offer and the interim judgement of the child care worker (bearing in mind the place of the program within an overall piece of therapeutic work) is that it has been effective and helpful to the process and the child. Feelings and fantasies have been expressed and dealt with, questions asked and information given and overall attitudes changed. No doubt Tony has a lot further to go but use of this computer based resource has made a positive contribution to a process.

Childcare Agency B

Agency B has used the program with a range of children between the ages of 9 and 13 of whom three were male and one female. Results have been generally more mixed than for Tony and have been received in less detail. These are reported briefly in summary form (Figure 1).

Subsequent to testing a technical problem was identified which had led to incorrect display of graphics. This would certainly have affected overall usability and enjoyment. However that notwithstanding, this still presents a more mixed picture than for Tony and some further research would be required to find out precisely why. One obvious point is that children are all different and cannot be required to like the same things. Tony's care worker commented that Tony 'was at the right stage to make use of the program' and this may also have been an issue.

Conclusions

Why have social care agencies not taken up the challenge of computer based resources given discussion of the issues over more than fifteen years? It seems clear even from this limited development and testing that this is not because computer based resources have nothing to offer. For some children there is substantial benefit to be gained. Clearly this is by no means guaranteed however and factors such as choice of resource, age and stage of the child, and method and delivery will have a bearing. This is not surprising however and is also true of books, drawing, discussion or any other method we might employ.

Benefits specific to the use of a computer based resource arising from use in agency A seem to include:

- improvements in general interest and attention spans producing a more positive attitude and greater enjoyment from the interaction
- an improved sense of control also aiding involvement in the intervention
- heightened sense of involvement with the content through use of multimedia elements helping the child relate to the characters and action.

On the other hand the resource did not seem to offer anything like the same level of benefit to children in agency B. This may be a feature of how and when the program was used, the stage of the children involved or other factors generally outside the therapist's control. The preliminary conclusion therefore is that such a resource can be of considerable benefit to some children but may not be equally useful to all - probably a feature of almost any resource, computer based or otherwise. It is clear however that:

- certain aspects of a computer based interaction do bring new elements to the therapeutic relationship which can be usefully exploited for the benefit of children
- hardware and software trends are moving us closer to the wider availability and acceptance of computer based resources.
- more and better software for use in childcare would be worthwhile to aid the process of discovering what works best and how it can best be used.

Child	Enjoyment	Usefulness	Care worker's Comment
A	a lot	not much	Liked music and sound. Interest higher than in books.
B	a lot	a bit	Raised issues about being different. Opened lots of areas
C	a bit	a lot	Enjoyed it overall.
D	not at all	not much	Child gave the opinion 'It's for babies. The music is stupid.'

Figure 1 Summary responses

In closing, Marshall McLuhan has commented that 'anyone who makes a distinction between entertainment and education shows he doesn't know the first thing about either.' Perhaps we should not expect a therapeutic intervention to ever be *entertainment* but it should certainly be as relaxed, enjoyable and non-threatening as possible. Computer based resources can help in this direction and for the benefit of children should be further developed, explored and deployed.

References

Stutz E, (1996) Is electronic entertainment hindering children's play and social development? in Gill T (Ed.) *Electronic Children* National Children's Bureau.

'Horrors on the Screen' in *The Guardian* (Newspaper, UK) Wed June 11 1997. P6-7.

Resnick H (Ed.) (1994) *Electronic Tools for Social Work Practice & Education*; Haworth Press.

Thom M & Macliver C, (1986) *Bruce's Story*, The Children's Society.

Bruce's Multimedia Story is available on CD-ROM for PC or Mac and PowerMac from Information PLUS. The CD includes colour and line-art versions of all artwork within the program. Instruction leaflet with thumbnails of artwork and full install instructions.

Price £35 + VAT = £39.95

Reviews

The Social Work Reference Library

reviewed by Bryan Glastonbury

Available from: NASW Press, POB 431, Annapolis JCY, MD 20701, USA. This CD-ROM is a data set based on three published US reference works (1995 editions):

Encyclopedia of Social Work (19th Edition - Editor-in-Chief Richard L. Edwards)

The Social Work Dictionary (3rd Edition - Robert L Barker)

Social Work Almanac (2nd Edition - Leon Ginsberg)

The data set is stated as containing the equivalent of 4,000 printed pages, and operates in the context of a search engine called *Folio VIEWS 3.1*.

Platform and technical details

The CD is designed to run on a Macintosh or a PC with Windows (though it can be made to function on DOS). The review was carried out using Windows 3.1. Price is \$275 for a single user version, plus 10% postage and handling. A short manual is included, along with a Quick Reference Card. It is adequate rather than comprehensive, but there is on-line help as well.

The program loads easily from CD, and can be installed wholly on the PC's hard disk, or run partly from the CD. The look and feel is typical of a Windows 3 package, with a top line of pull-down menus and a 'Toolbelt' of user-selectable click-on icons down the left of the screen. The contents can be scrolled through as a single very long document, including a facility to block, copy and paste script to a number of word processors, but the intention is that the user should employ the search engine to interrogate the data set. The core of this is a key word search, handled in the usual way by typing in words or phrases with Boolean operators. A range of additional facilities are available, such as establishing hypertext links, tagging, highlighting, creating subsets (search groups), and others, all functioning through the click-on icons. Overall these processes work smoothly and quickly, and anyone with reasonable familiarity with the Windows 3 environment will have no difficulty becoming a proficient user in a relatively short time.

Content

The content covers three broad areas - bibliography, dictionary and facts / figures about major social issues and provisions. These reflect the core aims of the three reference works which make up the package. However, the material can be used in various alternative ways, for example to access biographies of key figures in

*Bryan Glastonbury is Research
Professor at the Centre for Human
Service Technology.*

Contact him at:

*CHST
Department of Social Work Studies
University of Southampton
Southampton
SO17 1BJ
UK*

*Tel/Fax: +44 (0) 1703 592779
Email: bryan@chst.soton.ac.uk*

social work and social policy, scan essays on important topics, or find the full name of acronyms. Inevitably the focus of the content is on the USA, but there is a significant and useful amount of comparative material. Searching on 'Britain', for example, offers 58 entries, and takes the user into some informative overviews of North American and European social work developments. For a general user the historical perspective is also valuable, both in the review articles and the biographies, with a substantial coverage of social policy as well as social work / services.

Coverage of information technology is primarily through two substantial papers. William H. Butterfield offers a review of computer use in US social services agencies, ranging over the full span of professional, administrative

and managerial applications, as well as offering an extensive US bibliography. Dick Schoech has a paper on information systems which is thinner on the bibliographic side, but stronger on the theoretical and international dimensions. Both provide excellent overviews of developments.

Given that this CD-ROM sets out to be a US resource it is pleasantly wide-ranging in its appeal, and certainly has valuable contents for the European user. The search engine makes it easy to access, and offers real added value to the printed versions of the three reference works. For the individual purchaser it is expensive, but as a resource for a social work or social policy course it should be highly effective, and definitely worth ensuring student access.

Database of Social Research Methodology

reviewed by Bryan Glastonbury

Author - SRM Documentation Centre, Erasmus University, Rotterdam.

Published by Scolari, (the software division of Sage Publications)

Available from: Scolari, Sage Publications, 6 Bonhill Street, London EC2A 4PU, UK

CD with manual (1996 update reviewed).

Price £468 plus VAT for stand alone version, £703 plus VAT for network version. (PC only)

Description

This CD aims to provide a bibliography, abstract, terms search and thesaurus for social science research methodology, covering journal and book publications since 1970. It lists close on 40,000 authors from both sides of the Atlantic with references to their publications and publishers, as well as a substantial set of research terms. There are two 'search engines'. One is bibliographic, allowing the full list of publications in the database to be narrowed down by specifying from a range of variables, including author, publisher and topic (called in the program 'Term'). Alternatively it is possible to scroll and select from lists, though this can be a lengthy process. Once a publication is identified a screen displays a full reference and, usually, a sentence or two of outline content.

The other search is called the 'Thesaurus screen', and allows a research topic to be identified and both linked to closely related subject areas, and placed in a hierarchical framework to indicate the extent to which it is a large general topic area or a more specific and confined sub-area. This process is all about manipulating labels, and does not set out to provide definitions of terms or discussion of research methodology.

As a CD presentation, with a high price tag, the initial expectation is of something modern, easy-to-use and substantial. In fact the program is quite elderly, with, seemingly, only the content updated. It is a DOS application (3.0 or later), so although PCs with Windows 3.x can run it, Windows 95 machines presumably cannot unless DOS is available as an optional extra. Installation is easy enough, though this and any subsequent use requires the user to exit Windows and work from DOS. Running the program challenges the user's

Bryan Glastonbury is Research Professor at the Centre for Human Service Technology.

Contact him at:

CHST

*Department of Social Work Studies
University of Southampton
Southampton
SO17 1BJ
UK*

Tel/Fax: +44 (0) 1703 592779

Email: bryan@chst.soton.ac.uk

memory of long-disused features of DOS programs, like Boolean operators.

The program feels ancient - no mouse; no icons or other graphics; limited use of colour; extensive use of left, right, up and down arrows for scrolling. Appearance is clear and plain, but dull. Functionality is fiddly for users now accustomed to mouse operations. Everything depends on the program's utility.

Content

For review purposes I tried searching for four books which might expect to be found on the reading lists of people from the caring professions. One is a now elderly classic - *Survey Methods in Social Investigation* by Moser and Kalton. It is listed under Kalton, the second author, but not under Moser. Poor Sir Claus gets only one acknowledged reference in his own name, whereas Graham Kalton gets a bundle. Perhaps more seriously, the abstract simply describes it as a textbook, and makes no effort to provide even an outline of contents.

Strauss and Corbin's *Basics of Qualitative Research* is in (coming from the same publishing house as the program it would be surprising if it wasn't), with a brief abstract mentioning grounded theory. However, two other UK books are not there - Martin Herbert's *Planning a Research Project* (1990) and Sally French's *Practical Research: a guide for therapists* (1993). While the database is large, the conclusion perhaps has to be that it may have value for someone wanting an international search, but has less use for a UK student or other user wanting to focus on UK publications.

The list of terms leads to a similar mix of outcomes. The overall list is large, and includes many really obscure

ones, but some basics, like 'random sampling', are not there. It leads one to wonder whether the bibliography and the list of terms has been assembled bit by bit as and when items came to notice, rather than through a planned and structured approach. It is a pity that the database is so substantial, but seemingly with so many holes in it.

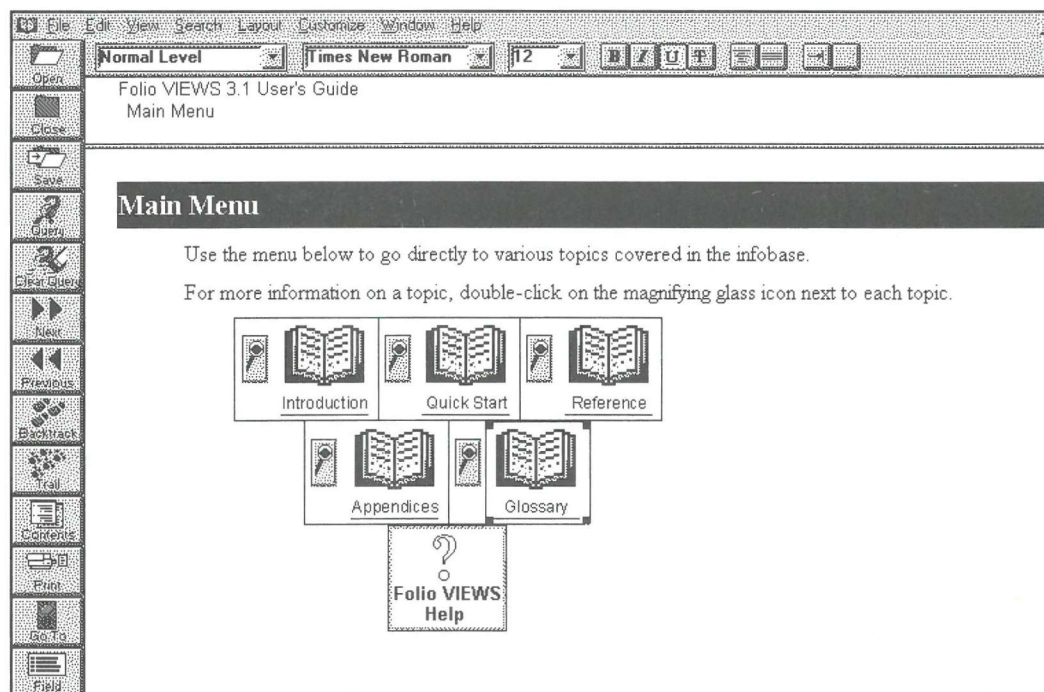
On screen the search processes worked well enough, despite a few irritations (like having to type Kalton* to get to the list of publications - just typing Kalton leads to a message to say that no such word can be found). Seeking to use wider facilities was more troublesome, such as failing after several efforts to get the 'Export' command to send anything more than an empty file to disk. Possibly these problems arise because the review was done on a machine set up to run Windows 3.11, but there cannot be many purely DOS PCs left, can there?

Manual

The manual is short and to the point. For many uses it does the job, but it is not a 'noddly guide', so does leave the user to trial, error, success, and sadly some failure.

Overall would I buy it?

No. It is much too expensive. If it was on my computer would I use it? Possibly, but not very likely. Having to close down Windows applications to get into it, and losing all the benefits of multi-tasking would be too inconvenient. I would need a lot of persuading that *Database of Social Research Methodology* contains anything that could not be found as easily and probably more comprehensively on the Internet.



Twentieth Century Mortality

reviewed by Bryan Glastonbury

Author - Office for National Statistics (ONS).

Published by UK Government Statistical Service

Available from: ONS Sales Desk, zone B1/06, Office for National Statistics, 1 Drummond Gate, London, SW1V 2QQ

Tel: enquiries +44 (0) 171 533 6262

credit cards only +44 (0) 171 533 5678

Fax: +44 (0) 171 533 5689.

CD with manual, 1997

Price £50 plus VAT.

Description

This is not a stand-alone package: rather it is a data set offered in four different formats for analysis within a database program. The formats are for two versions of Microsoft's Access, V2 and 95, for dBase III, and a generic set (comma separated) for import into other programs. Hence a presupposition of using this CD is access to and knowledge of a suitable database program. For this review Access V2.0 was used, and everything worked smoothly.

The core data on the CD are a record of deaths in England and Wales by gender, age group, and cause of death, for every year from 1901 to 1995. While much of this is not new (annual mortality statistics have been published for some time), the electronic format, and amalgamation of data is an important and very welcome development. Indeed, as the ONS' descriptive leaflet says, 'The early years have been painstakingly entered manually from paper records of the day'. As users of ONS statistics will know, age groupings are well suited to analysis in relation to health and social care. As well as pre-school and school age breakdowns, and 10 yearly ranges for working age adults, there is the useful split between those who are older or very old (over 85s).

Causes of death relate to the prevailing International Classification of Diseases (ICD), from the first issue up to the latest in use in 1995, ICD9. Additional data files list the various ICD dictionaries with their codes. There is also a useful set of population figures for every year, broken down by gender and age group.

The range of uses of the data is determined by the program within which they are lodged, so can be subject to the usual queries and report frameworks of whatever is your favoured database. For the most part the uses will range over demographic and mortality analysis, perhaps looking at trends over the years, or at age and gender differences. Likely users will be researchers, and those involved in developing trends and projections for planning purposes.

This is not an exciting CD - it has no soundtrack or fancy graphics, none of the gimmicks that so often appear on packages with limited substance. This package is all substance, a huge amount of data, nicely prepared for analysis. However accessible, in principle, much of the data were in the past, this CD is a huge step forward in bringing demographic material to our fingertips, and adding flexibility to the ways in which we can use it. The price is also low, so is within the range of researchers and planners, making it very definitely a CD worth having.

Now the new electronic format has been established, what next? We may reasonably assume updates as more recent data comes available. Can we look for more of the historic data, such as area breakdowns? We can only hope that somewhere in the back rooms of ONS the painstaking manual entry continues.

*Bryan Glastonbury is Research
Professor at the Centre for Human
Service Technology.*

Contact him at:

CHST
*Department of Social Work Studies
University of Southampton
Southampton
SO17 1BJ
UK*

*Tel/Fax: +44 (0) 1703 592779
Email: bryan@chst.soton.ac.uk*

Research Methods for Social Work & Nursing

reviewed by Neil Ballantyne

Published by ProCare

Available from: ProCare, CHST, Department of Social Work Studies, University of Southampton, Southampton SO17 1BJ, UK Tel: +44 (0) 1703 592925 Fax: +44 (0) 1703 592779 Email: procare@chst.soton.ac.uk

Price: £50 within UK HE Institutions, other prices see ProCare website
<http://www.soton.ac.uk/~chst/procare>

Software specifications

This ProCare module entitled 'Research Methods for Social Work and Nursing' aims to, 'help students understand the realities of research, to appreciate research theory and methods in a practical context, and to be able to carry out a research assignment'.

The program is provided on two floppy discs capable of installation on a computer running Windows 3.1, Windows for Workgroups, Windows 95, or in a network environment. The program occupies around 5Mb and requires a graphics driver capable of and set at 256 colours or above. Installation is very painless with lots of help to assist the user throughout the installation process and clear technical advice offered in the accompanying user guide. In fact the program, and its accompanying documentation, excels in offering clear and friendly advice in all aspects of program use: from installation, to browsing, to curriculum integration.

The main menu presented on the opening screen is attractive and well laid out offering a series of headings which outline the content of the module in two parts. It supports flexible use by permitting users to enter any of the module's nine units from the opening screen.

Description of Software

The module is comprehensive in its coverage taking the student from forming an initial research question, to methods of disseminating results. However, its best use is likely to be supplementary to other modes of teaching rather than as unitary module. Part 1 consists of four units introducing the student to research and the research process:

- Introduction to research;
- Research in context;
- Setting the scene;
- Stages in planning.

Part 2 consists of five units which explore research methods in greater detail:

- Using existing data;
- Gathering new data;
- Research approaches;
- Analysis;
- Presentation and implementation.

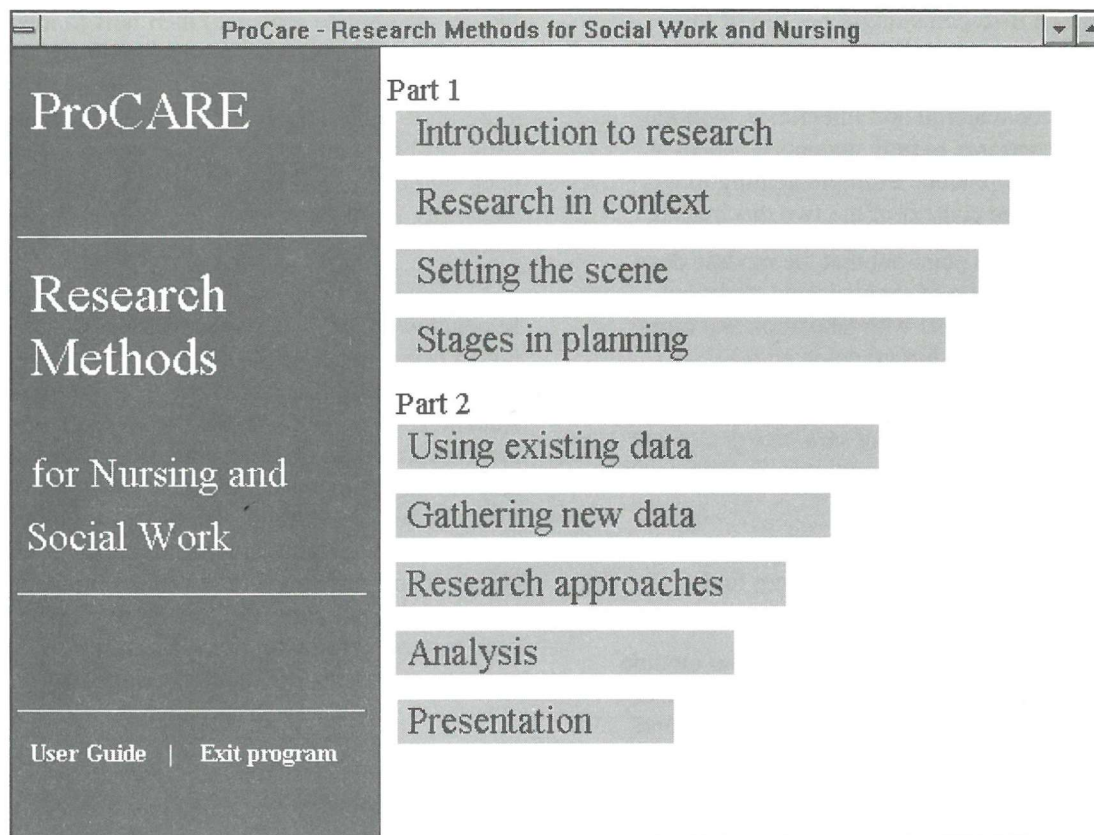
Clicking on any of the unit titles takes the user into a tidily organised working area with a main working window on the left, some topic headings on the right and navigation buttons above. At any time from the working window the user can browse a glossary of key words, examine the bibliography, or retrieve a pop-up notepad facility to make notes on content (saveable to the hard disk or, more importantly, to the students floppy disk).

Neil Ballantyne is a social work lecturer at the University of Strathclyde and is currently working, with funding from the Use of the MANs Initiative (UMI), in Scotland, to develop web based teaching materials for social work.

Contact him at:

*Department of Social Work,
University of Strathclyde
Jordanhill Campus,
76 Southbrae Drive
Glasgow G13 1PP
SCOTLAND, UK*

*Tel: +44 (0) 141 950 3373
Fax: +44 (0) 141 950 3474
Email: cjds03@strath.ac.uk
WWW: <http://weber.strath.ac.uk>*



Navigation takes a little getting used to, and naive computer users will need some orientation, but it's fairly easy to find your way around aided by a backtrack button, a bookmark function, and the hypertext topic menu on the right hand side. A helpful progress chart enables the user to view an overview of all units and topics within units, highlighting those already viewed and the percentage of the whole module viewed.

An engaging and interactive toolkit is also accessible from the working area. The toolkit comprises: an exercise in interviewing, an exercise on assessing priorities, a questionnaire design exercise, a random sampling generator, a percentage calculator, a program to demonstrate the use of graphs in presentations, and an exercise to spot coding errors in data. The toolkit also gives access to two case studies used in the main program and some external links to other programs including Netscape and SPSS (NB. as long as the programs are available on the machine and the software has been properly configured to make the link). The toolkit adds considerable value to the module and is bound to engage the interest of students. It's fun to play around with but each of its elements are also carefully integrated into the main body of the teaching material (so, for example, the random number generator is accessible from the topic on sampling). I especially liked the interview exercise enabling the student to view different ways of approaching the asking of sensitive questions - this approach could be built on in future versions perhaps incorporating use of multimedia.

The supporting documentation (including the installation notes, user guide, and teaching and learning guide) is excellent and written by people who demonstrate a deep understanding of integrating courseware into the curriculum and appreciate the needs of tutors for flexibility in using courseware. The teaching and learning guide offers tutors sound advice on identifying suitable pathways through the materials and on tailoring the module to the needs of their particular student group and specific learning context.

Content

Moving on to the content of the package I found this to be comprehensive, clear and well designed. The authors intend the module to be, '*...a theoretically sound but essentially practical 'how to do it' learning resource.*', and in this they succeed. The module is pitched appropriately for use in undergraduate level nursing and social work professional education. The authors' constant linking of social work practice skills with the skills required of a researcher helps to demystify the research process - and make the module very relevant for use in a practitioner research programme.

Active learning is encouraged by the use of case material which weaves in and around discussion of the research process. Students are challenged to reflect on research issues and offered canned feedback from the authors. There are so many requests to reflect and make notes that

at times I wondered if students might not tire of this technique, but this may simply be a caution to tutors to follow the advice of the authors and think carefully about pathways through the material and integration with the curriculum. Most exercises permit students to select a nursing or social work practice example helping to integrate learning in the context of the two disciplines.

The authors are careful to point out that the module does not offer detailed discussion of sophisticated statistical techniques, though it does deal with tabulation and cross tabulation. As someone who has grappled with SPSS, I couldn't resist a wry smile when I read in one section that...

'...when the possible use of statistics arises you will be pointed towards computer programs which will do the job for you!'

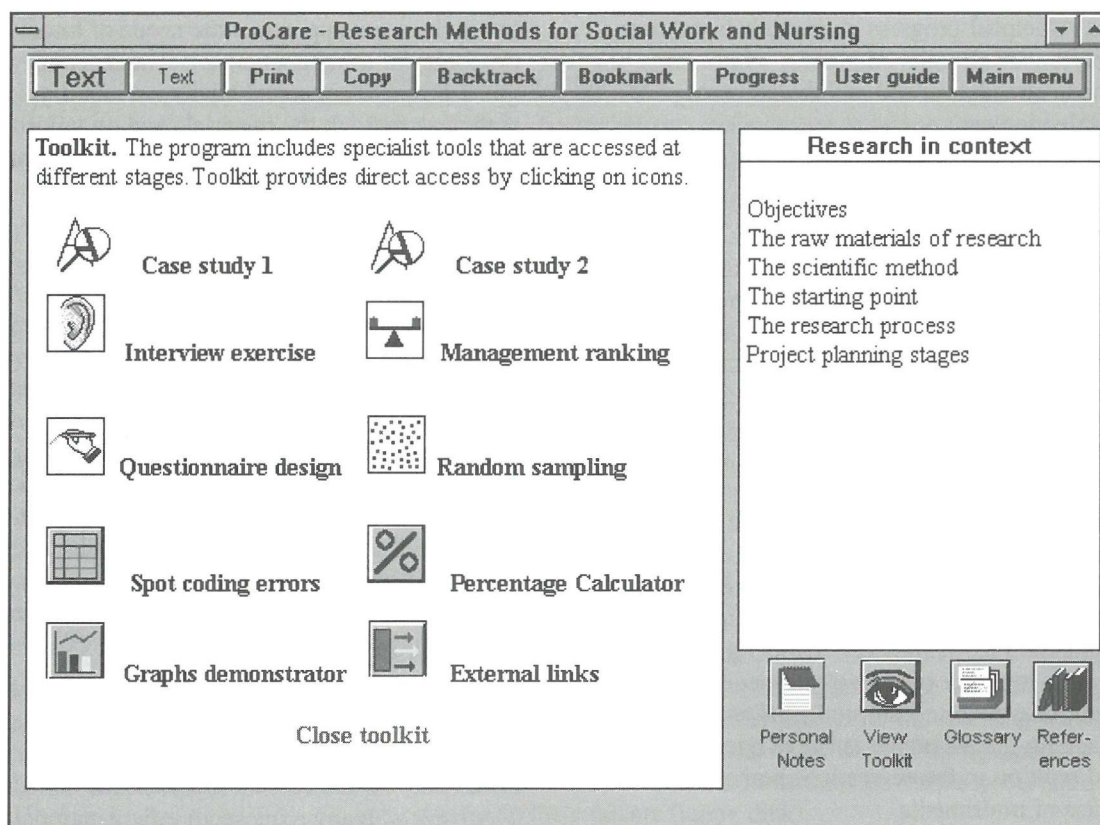
Although the emphasis throughout is firmly on the practicalities of doing research, ethical issues and methodological debates are also discussed.

One surprising little blip in my experience of the module came in the section on literature search where an exercise asking the student to identify the main professional and academic journals in their discipline offered the rather surprising feedback that there aren't many social work journals in the UK, the main ones being BJSW and Community Care. In the nursing subject area the feedback suggested that there were many journals but (in what looks

like an incomplete sentence) then fails to identify any. I would have thought the authors could have offered more guidance here.* Also, although the section on conducting a literature search mentions use of the web and identifies some on-line bibliographic databases more could have been said on this subject. Since the program has the capability to make external links to websites, links to some of the web based databases such as BIDS could have been built in.

In conclusion, this is a thoughtfully designed module which offers a valuable and highly flexible learning resource to the undergraduate social work or nursing student. Although heavily reliant on text based presentation, considerable value is added by the reflective and interactive exercises scattered throughout the module. It would be nice, in future versions, to see the incorporation of multimedia components such as video clips to demonstrate interview skills for example, and the incorporation of larger and manipulable datasets into the case material. However, in the meantime, the ProCare package represents excellent value for money.

** Editor's note: The comments made in this paragraph were referred to ProCare who have made changes to the content to rectify the omission of Nursing Journals and include a fuller range of Social Work Journals.*



Effective Policy, Planning and Implementation

reviewed by Rob Sykes

Gould, N. & Moultrie, K. (eds.) (1997) *Effective Policy, Planning and Implementation*, Ashgate, Aldershot, x + 103pp., £32.50 hbk.

This slim volume comprises an introduction and eight substantive chapters which are based upon conference presentations selected from the second *Information Management in the Social Services* conference held in November 1996 under the auspices of the Social Science Research and Development Unit at the University of Bath. The overall theme of the conference and the book is the quality of information available to social service organisations, rather than a concern with information management tools themselves.

A first, and lasting, impression gained on reading this book is that its contents are very obviously based upon conference presentations, some even retaining their presentation format. Furthermore, the style of delivery and mode of discussion of most chapters is also very clearly oriented to conference discussion. All of the chapters, bar one (by Steyaert), are essentially descriptive of either a particular information management system, projects to evaluate such systems, sources of information, and so on. It is true that most of the chapters also introduce some sort of evaluation of the system or procedures etc. described, and some (those by Tutt, Colombi, Steyaert, and Gould and Wright) engage in a more analytical treatment of their subject matter. Nevertheless, most of the material in this book is more descriptive than analytical.

Turning to a more detailed review of a selection of the chapters, the first three chapters, by Tutt, Colombi and Steyaert, focus on the lessons to be learnt from the experience of using information systems to cope with specific organisational needs. Tutt's chapter entitled 'Why have social services failed to capitalise on monitoring and evaluation systems?' describes two systems designed to monitor the effectiveness of a) local youth justice systems and b) child care services more generally. Though the first of these systems was generally agreed to have succeeded and gained acceptance by practitioners and managers, the second did not. As an indication of this failure, Tutt points out that it is still possible, ten years after the launch of a child care monitoring system in 1986, to enter certain social services departments and to receive 'a baffled response from staff' when asked questions such as: 'How many children are "looked after" by the authority', or 'How many children "looked after" return home, or move into independent living supported by the authority'. The problem, he argues, is that, unlike youth justice, there is no clear consensus about what the objectives of the child care system are. Where monitoring of child care system has occurred it has focused upon with process monitoring, 'counting heads and beds', rather than upon performance monitoring of agreed targets and objectives. The key issues for social services managers and practitioners which Tutt derives from his two case studies are threefold:

- i) to devise an IT strategy which has utility for the practitioners which gives them regular feedback on their budget and levels of activity;
- ii) to move towards an information strategy in which the appropriate information is actually used to inform rational management decisions; and
- iii) to recognise, through effective monitoring, how the outcomes which service users experience are actually affected by the actions of managers and practitioners.

Rob Sykes is senior lecturer in social policy in the School of Health and Community Studies, Sheffield Hallam University. He is on the British Social Policy Association executive and on the SocInfo advisory group. He has a professional and personal interest in the development and use of IT and other new learning technologies.

Contact him at:

*School of Health and Community Studies
Collegiate Crescent Campus
Sheffield Hallam University
Sheffield
S10 2BP*

*Tel: +44 (0)114 253 2543
Fax: +44 (0)114 253 2430
Email: r.h.sykes@shu.ac.uk*

Colombi's chapter on probation service client information systems starts innocuously enough by describing NIPSIS, the National Probation Service Information Systems Strategy, and CRAMS, the Case Records Administration and Management System a central computerised plank of NIPSIS. It is when he turns to an assessment of NIPSIS and CRAMS that the tone changes. Colombi asks three questions: 'Is the infrastructure and the CRAMS software appropriate to the task?', 'How well is the project managed?', and 'Is the service and the taxpayer getting value for money?'. The criticisms are trenchant and sustained, but suffice it here to say that Colombi's answers to these questions appear to be 'No!', 'Badly!', and 'No!'.

Steyaert's chapter is, at least for this reviewer, the most reflective and thought provoking. Steyaert sets his discussion of client information systems both in an international context, and in the context of an argument that the perceived problems of such systems may be viewed as having a number of interconnected layers. He begins from the negative attitudes and opinions of both practitioners and policy makers to computerised client information systems and suggests that closer examination of such objections and complaints reveals that several layers of issues can be distinguished. He calls these the methodological, the functional, the policy and the professional layers. It is not possible to do justice to Steyaert's argument in a brief review, but the essential point is that for each layer he carefully unpacks and evaluates the objections raised at different layers, and persistently argues for the importance, indeed the vital character of client information systems.

Steyaert then links this research-based discussion (undertaken in Flanders, the Netherlands and Israel) with a consideration of the UK *Looking After Children* initiative and finds, amongst other features, that client information systems in the UK are generally more structured and automated than in mainland Europe. He also suggests, however, that the gathering of data in the UK does not always mean that it then used in the most effective way or that it improves the quality of service provision. His pointed and telling conclusion is that if we cannot identify the positive contributions information management can

have upon service outcomes then concern with information management is a waste of intellectual energy.

Using the Rikki Neave case¹ as an example, Steyaert asks whether better information management may have helped the local social work practitioners to overcome what he calls 'Type 1' and 'Type 2' errors. A type one error means that an hypothesis (in this case that a child is in danger and therefore should be removed from its family) is rejected even though it proves to be true. A type two error would be when an hypothesis is accepted even though it is false (for example that the child is removed from its parents even though it is not, in fact, in danger). As Steyaert points out, it has been shown that social workers and other social service practitioners prefer to accept a higher degree of type two errors rather than risk their own reputation by making type one errors. Yet could proper information management have had an influence on cases like that of Rikki Neave and upon the Type1/Type 2 dilemma? He suggests it might in that good information management systems provide structured information which can be shared by different personnel involved in such cases, provide a framework for monitoring cases and for further action, and provide social workers and others with detailed facts to support their case for proper resources to carry out their tasks.

In summary, this book is, for the most part, a collection of interesting and informative pieces which various workers in the social services who are interested in improving the quality of information management to support their activities would find of some use. However, the rather limited length and depth of discussion in some of the chapters, coupled with the overall length of the book and its high price (there is no softback version) will certainly not encourage many 'rank-and-file' social service practitioners to buy it. One wonders, indeed, why the core chapters of this book, could not have been put together in a cheaper and therefore more accessible format. The message of this book overall is that the quality of information and its management in the social services is in need of considerable rethinking and improvement. If this is so, then surely the message needs to be heard and understood by as wide an audience as possible?

¹ Rikki Neave was a six year old boy found murdered after a life full of physical and mental cruelty. His mother was found not guilty of his murder but imprisoned for cruelty to her son. His case had been known to the local social services department since 1991, and its apparent failure to prevent the child's continuing abuse and eventual murder was the subject of both media and official investigation.

Organisations and Communication Technology

reviewed by Bob Sapey

Fulk J & Steinfield C (Eds.) (1990) Sage Publications, New York ISBN 0-8039-3531-5

Reviewing a reader of thirteen chapters is a bit like reviewing thirteen books, which would not only be excessive on words, but potentially tiresome. This review is therefore of necessity, extremely truncated, which in turn means that it cannot reflect the richness and depth of writing of this particular book.

Although now eight years old, this collection of papers has not lost any of its value to the study of organisations and technology. The principle reason for this and one of the main aims of the book, is that rather than attempting to measure and evaluate the latest impacts of new technology, the authors have set out to take a more reflective approach in the hope of developing a theoretical infrastructure in which such studies might take place. The editors suggest that the field of technology is currently impoverished of theory while being overrun by data, and there hope is that a theoretical infrastructure will permit us to gain knowledge from the observations of developments in this field.

The book is structured into five parts which do develop some key themes. In Part 1, 'Theorizing About Information Technology in Organizations', the need for theory is discussed and promoted. While interesting in its own right - I found myself making links to the debates about the need for theory in social work - this is primarily an introduction to the rest of the book.

Part 2, as its title states, presents 'Two Views of Information Technology, Tasks, and Organizations'. First, James Beniger argues that in conceptualising information technology as organisations and vice-versa, we are able to draw upon a wide range of established theory concerning the latter, in order to understand the former. This really sets the scene for the rest of the book in which the writers do just that. The essence of his argument for this conceptualisation is that bureaucracies and other modern organisations evolved as a response to the need for more efficient ways of processing information in order to control faster production and operational processes. As such, new technologies are a continuation of this and should not be thought of as completely distinct. This is followed by a paper by Clifford Nass and Laurie Mason which criticises current approaches to researching technology as being unable to generate useful generalisations. They go on to propose a range of variables, to which others could well be added, that would permit more meaningful study to occur. While complementing Beniger's paper to some extent, this also provides a more traditional, theory-testing approach to research than the interpretivism associated with classical organisations theorists such as Weber.

The third part, 'Individual Interactions with Information Technology in the Organizational Context', makes use of symbolic interactionism to develop the other main theme that runs through the book - media choice. First, Linda Trevino, Richard Daft and Robert Lengel present a rational model of decision making in which the interacting variables are message equivocality, contextual determinants and media symbolism. This is followed by Robert Zmud who draws out two further key issues of control and manipulation in seeking to understand more about why strategic managers fail to use information systems. The rational model is then challenged by Janet Fulk, Joseph Schmitz and Charles Steinfield with their 'social influence' model in which they also take account of the ways in which people experience technology. In particular this affects the hierarchy of media symbolism which in turn further influences the experience of media use.

Bob Sapey is Senior Lecturer in Social Work at the University of Central Lancashire. He is a member of the CTI Human Services Advisory Group and edits the Professional Digest for Professional Social Work. His current research is on disability and housing and he is currently revising Mike Oliver's book 'Social Work with Disabled People'.

Contact him at:

*Department of Social Work and
Community Studies
University of Central Lancashire
Preston
PR1 2HE
UK*

*Tel: +44 (0)1772 893468
Fax: +44 (0)1772 892974
Email: r.j.sapey@uclan.ac.uk
WWW:
<http://www.uclan.ac.uk/facs/health/soc>*

In Part 4, 'Information Technology and Collective Behaviours', the focus moves away from the individual, but the social influence model is picked up by Noshir Contractor and Eric Eisenberg. They welcome its contribution but suggest that it lacks the inclusion of communication theory that would allow for an understanding of the processes by which social information flows. Their starting point is that everything about the adoption and use of media is social and go on to apply communications network concepts to the use of technology. In doing so they draw on Giddens' structuration and Burt's theory of structural action. This theme is then continued by Marshall Poole and Geraldine De Sanctis in seeking to understand the use made of 'Group Decision Support Systems'. At this stage the book felt to be less relevant to technology and social work but the next paper by Lynne Markus, which explores a critical mass theory of interactive media, could be quite useful in studying the developing use of the Internet. This part is then completed with a paper from Terry Connolly and Brian Thorn in which they examine the domain of the discretionary database, which falls somewhere between the simple computerisation of data that is already stored and the expert systems that might be commercially developed. Bulletin boards are the example they use, in which information is provided free of charge, yet does require some form of motivation.

The final section of the book looks at 'Information Technology and Organizational Design'. George Huber seeks to integrate studies of IT with organisation theory to

understand its impact, particularly on organisational design, intelligence and decision making. In doing so he picks up on the earlier theme of media choice and suggests that the assumption made that equivocal messages require a rich media may not be absolute. Rather, the use of a lean media such as email, may extend participation and allow communications to focus on the more equivocal aspects of their discussions when meeting face to face. In another important part of this paper, he argues that it is one of several mistaken impressions that advanced technology leads to rational outcomes. Thomas Allen and Oscar Hauptman then consider the role of technology in research and development organisations, and how its integration into different organisational designs relates to the effectiveness of pursuing functional or project goals. The final paper in the book is from Peter Keen. He is concerned to help managers use telecommunications to maintain organisational health. He considers how their use can help to change and simplify organisational structures, while increasing direct and flexible contact between people. To do otherwise might be counter-productive.

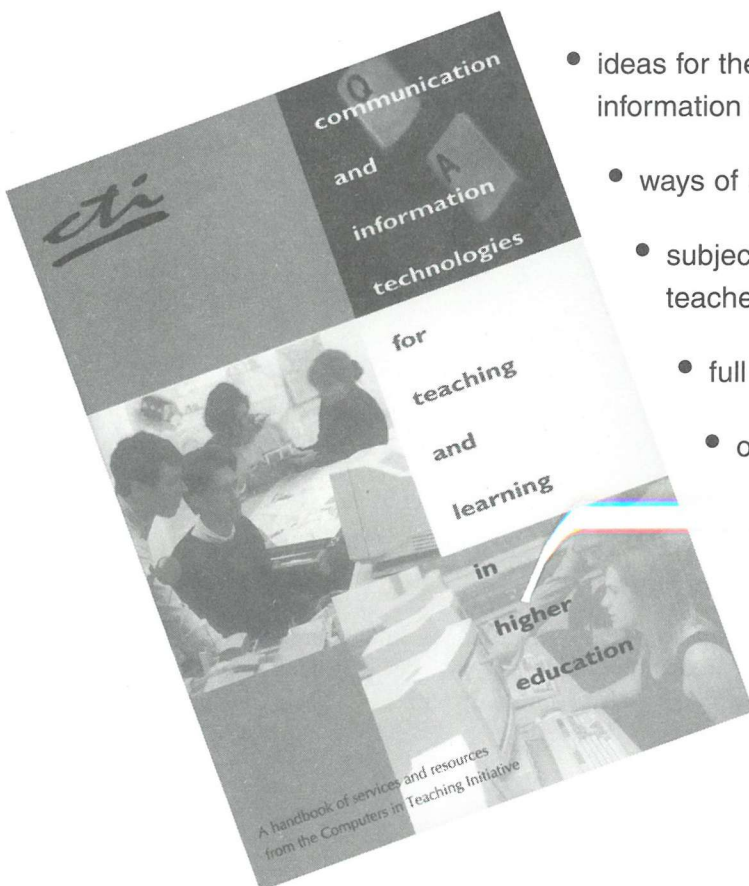
As I said at the beginning, this review is necessarily brief and only touches the surface of this book. However, I believe that it succeeds in the goal of editors which was 'less to present closed deductive systems than to organize thought and energize conceptual development on a very important and timely topic for organizational communication studies' (p23).



communication and information technologies for teaching and learning in higher education

Please find enclosed with this issue of the journal a complimentary copy of the new handbook of services and resources from the CTI (Computers in Teaching Initiative). Packed with ideas for computer assisted learning, it includes details of all the CTI subject centres, the CTI Support Service, and related initiatives in higher education in the UK. It aims to provide a single, ready-to-hand resource for all those involved, or wishing to be involved, in using learning technologies in both education and training.

The handbook includes:



- ideas for the effective use of communications and information technology in higher education
 - ways of integrating CAL into the curriculum
 - subject-specific and generic resources for teachers
 - full list of services from the CTI Centres
 - other sources of support and expertise
- Learning explained**
- essential contacts and Web sites
 - publications list and order form

Volume 11 of the journal will include a themed issue on 'communication and information technologies within human services education and training'. If you have been working in this area we invite you to share your research and developments with the readership of the journal. Contact the editor or visit the web pages for further information on submitting papers to New Technology in the Human Services.

WWW: <http://www.soton.ac.uk/~chst/>

Email: jr@chst.soton.ac.uk

First Announcement
HUSITA 5
Budapest, 29 August-1 September 1999
Human Service Information Technology Applications
International Conference and Exhibition
and
On-line NetConference

SOCIAL SERVICES IN THE INFORMATION SOCIETY: CLOSING THE GAP

The aim of HUSITA:

Human Service Information Technology Applications (HUSITA) is the international conference that links the academicians, educators, practitioners and policy makers sharing mutual interest in the application of information and information technology in the human services. The HUSITA Foundation was formed in order to guarantee the continuity of HUSITA conferences as well as the quality of these.

HUSITA 5

This international conference brings together scholars, practitioners and policy makers to exchange information and ideas to share experiences on how to help the information society increase the quality of social services world-wide. The historical and social changes that have taken place in the world have widened the gap between East and West, North and South as well as between the rich and the poor, the educated and the uneducated. HUSITA 5, which will take place in a country that is undergoing social and historical changes, will aim at investigating the potentials of closing the gap.

Conference Chair: Dr. András Jávör
Former Secretary of State, Ministry of Social Welfare

International Programme Committee:
Jan Steyaert (Chair), Gail Auslander, Zsuzsa Ferge, Bryan Glastonbury, Dick Schoech.

The host country and city

Hungary is ready to provide a welcome to participants arriving from European countries and other parts of the world. Budapest in the heart of Europe provides all the high quality facilities required by our guests. The city can be easily reached by air or surface travel from all parts of the world. We hope that our conference guests will not only widen their experiences at the conference but enjoy the hospitality of this wonderful country as well.

Conference Venue:

HUSITA 5 will be held at the Medical University of Budapest. Being one of the best known universities of Budapest, the Medical University welcomes participants coming from all over the world and provides excellent facilities for the event. The venue is easily accessible from the centre of the town and is also 15 minutes travel by public transport to a range of conference hotels.

Hosting Organisations:

John von Neumann Computer Society is the national computer society of Hungary.

Conference Tours Ltd. is the official congress organiser of Neumann Society and the Federation of Technical and Scientific Societies.

Further Information

Conference Tours Ltd
Kossuth tér 6-8.
H-1055 Budapest
Hungary

Tel/Fax: +36 1 153-0025
E-mail: conftours@mtesz.hu

Conference Web site: <http://www.husita.org/> for continuous updated information
<http://www.fz.hse.nl/causa/amsterdam/> for background information and context setting