

CHAPTER 7

ICT, Senior End-users and Alienation

7.1 Introduction

There are two problems with the discussion so far. Firstly, it has focused on the work environment and if Marx's theory of alienation has any general explanatory power in researching ICT it must be applicable to our relationship to ICT in a non-work environment; to research what Marx (1970) and Harvey categorise as universal alienation (Harvey 2018). Although Marx referred to the pervasive nature of alienation and its influence in non-work environments, he did not develop this aspect of alienation and therefore his theory is often, mistakenly in my view, considered as being applicable only to work. Here it should be noted that when Marx wrote the *Manuscripts* in 1844 it was quite common for all members of a family, including children from three upwards, to work in the mills and factories of the time. Hence, the very close tie between work and personal/family life and Marx most likely would have been aware of these practical conditions because Engels, his future long-time collaborator, was in the process of writing up his research for his book *The Condition of the Working Class in England* (1987 [1845]) when they met in Paris in August 1844. Marx also has an extended discussion in *Capital* about the consequences that a long working day, the division of labour, the introduction of machinery in a factory setting, and labour being a commodity, have on personal life. These comments reference back to his remarks when discussing Feuerbach where Marx notes that the division of labour defines a person's life activity where 'each man has a particular exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and from which he cannot escape' (Marx and Engels 1970: 53). He also talks of the impact the division of labour has on 'intellectual and material activity-enjoyment and labour, production and consumption' (Marx and Engels 1970: 52). These comments indicate that he appreciated the adverse impact the alienated relation between capital and labour had outside work. The second problem is that this

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research has so far focused on manifestations of alienation, without considering what strategies or coping mechanisms could be used to confront alienation or their effectiveness.

This chapter addresses these issues by drawing upon data collected during a series of hands-on computer sessions undertaken with a group of end-user pensioners based in South London, UK.

7.2 ICT and the Senior User: Research Themes

Recent research on ageing and ICT has been driven by demographic trends indicating that by 2050, 20% of the global population will be aged over 65 and the EU has estimated that by 2060, a third of Europe's population will be over 60. The 7th Framework Programme for the Ambient Assisted Living Joint Programme, for example, allocated over 1.15 billion Euro between 2008 and 2013 to fund 140 projects concerning digital technologies for older people. The EU Horizon 2020 programme expects to expand by up to 25% since policy objectives on health and ageing cannot be realised without ICT innovation (European Commission 2020). These trends are propelled by and are seen as integral to the emergence of the so-called Silver Economy estimated to be worth, in Europe in 2015, a baseline value of €3.7 trillion primarily comprising private expenditure by older people (50 plus) on various goods and services, from housing to recreation (European Commission 2018b). The Commission goes on to argue:

Official population projections suggest the Silver Economy will expand steadily over the next 10 years, across the EU. Based on the study's assumptions, it has the potential to expand by approximately 5% per year up to 2025, to €5.7 trillion. The study experts forecast the contribution of the European Silver Economy to GDP to reach €6.4 trillion and 88 million jobs by 2025. This would be equivalent to 32% of EU GDP and 38% of the Union's employment (European Commission 2018).

By 2020, Asia Pacific's ageing market is projected to reach US\$3.3 trillion (GlobalAgeingTimes 2019). In North America, the over-60s are expected to represent nearly 50% of total consumption. Estimates put the global value of this new market at \$15 trillion by 2020 (Global Coalition on Aging 2019).

Much of the research directed at this market revolves around issues associated with health, with studies concerned with ICT and people with dementia increasing eightfold since 2000 (Fabricatore et al. 2019). However, there is a growing recognition that seniors' use of digital technologies for activities such as online shopping and socialisation also present substantial opportunities for capital to make significant profits. Consequently, the thrust of the argument, which is primarily directed at marketeers, is that mature

end-users need encouragement to expand their use of ICT. From this perspective, mature end-users are stripped of their humanity save for the money in their pockets.

However, while seniors are embraced as consumers, they are less welcome as employees in the IT industry which, in the United Kingdom, shows a concentration of workers (58%) aged 25–44 (Tech Partnership 2016). Current research indicates that ageism continues to be a major problem within the IT industry with 76% of IT professionals in a recent study stating they had witnessed age discrimination (Dice 2018). Within the UK ICT labour market, discriminatory practices are prevalent with HR managers frequently confessing that age influences employment decision making. While these tendencies reflect age discrimination more generally within employment, they are acute within the ICT industry. Ageing and ICT are therefore intimately linked across a range of issues.

7.3 ICT and Learning

The research concerning the general range of problems confronting end-users of ICT shows that the difficulties experienced by senior end-users are not unique to this user group. Mann's description of the alienating experience of students in HE also resonates with concerns familiar to those connected with teaching ICT across a range of ages and genders. Phelps et al. (2005) note that where learners have control over their learning environment, they 'feel comfortable about learning any software, are willing to "have a go" and are generally not intimidated by computers' (Phelps et al. 2005: 70). The approach of Phelps et al. (2005) is relevant to the discussion about alienation and senior end-users because they foreground the notion that control must be given to the learner as s/he learns with end-users having the power to determine the pace, direction, purpose and product of their learning activity. Phelps et al. (2005) speak of learners being 'agents (playing) an active role in co-constructing knowledge through interaction with others and with their environment' (Phelps et al. 2005: 73). They argue that without the development of learning based on complexity theory (a recognition that systems are comprised of multiple, inter-related processes), computer training will fail to provide the 'self-directed learners needed for an ICT based society' (Phelps et al. 2005: 81). For Phelps et al., self-activity of the learner is central to effective learning and so is learning in a cooperative environment leading to co-construction of knowledge through the interaction with others. Although alienation does not form part of the discussion of Phelps et al., it is possible to discern themes that fit with the insights presented by Marx. The application of complexity theory allows for a degree of autonomy to be given over to end-users and implicit in this view is the recognition that powerlessness is often a problem for end-users in an ICT learning situation. Similarly, the call for ICT learners to co-operatively engage with others is a

recognition that alienation from others needs to be overcome for learning to be more effective and transferable to new situations.

A study of web blogs in a web-based distance learning environment on student feelings of isolation, alienation and frustration noted that the lack of prompt 'unambiguous feedback and technical problems' are a source of student distress (Dickey 2004: 280). While providing an enabling structure for study, the technology also cultivates feelings of marginalisation and disenfranchisement for students learning in this environment. Dickey's research implies that small group communities play a critical role in the success of the blogs since they helped develop the notion of a connected community. Further, students used the blogs to discuss the issues and themes reaching beyond those expected in a more formal academic discourse and postings contained elements 'of socialisation, reports of activities and events, signs of support and reports of feelings and emotions' (Dickey 2004: 283). Through this process, students developed a support 'system within the community' and could 'empathize' with each other's problems (Dickey 2004: 284); they were in effect breaking beyond the initial parameters set for the activity. Dickey remarks that 'learner perceptions of community and alienation impact on learning' and that the use of technologies such as blogs can enhance the community and thereby help alleviate feelings of alienation (Dickey 2004: 290). Dickey's paper is a further example of how instructors of ICT increasingly see the need to consider concepts such as alienation and isolation and how they view technology to be both the creator and solution to these experiences. However, the concepts of alienation and isolation are not fully described or explored and are left hanging in the air, being used as labels to name some vague form of dissatisfaction.

ICT usability design and human-computer interaction are beginning to appreciate the value of community in developing systems for seniors. Research advocating a turn towards community, argues that ICT designers concentrate on the communities that seniors 'engage on the daily basis of their interests, skills, needs, goals, self-identities and contingencies of daily life and life transitions' (Righi, Sayago and Blat 2017: 26) thus anchoring the learning of ICTs to a real practical context and recognising that senior end-users need to learn within a collegiate environment.

Several key features emerge from the review of research concerned with learning and technology which are of direct significance for end-users' experience of ICT. First is the recognition that initial expectations about the positive role of ICT within the learning environment across a range of levels and subjects have not been realised. Second, the preliminary response to this problem focused on technical solutions which ultimately failed to resolve the contradiction between what the technologies can do and what actually happens. The third is the recognition to move beyond technical solutions and to embrace approaches inspired by theoretical frameworks associated with other disciplines. Another aspect is the frequency with which terms such as isolation, marginalisation and alienation appear in the literature even if these lack a specific coherent

definition. While reference to concepts associated with alienation seem important for investigating other societal issues, they are neglected by research concerning the relationship between senior end-users and ICT. The discussion will now focus on the Southwark Pensioners Action Group (SPAG).

7.4 Southwark Pensioners Action Group (SPAG)

SPAG is a campaigning organisation, welcoming members aged 50-plus living in Southwark, providing advice on a range of issues and campaigns including adequate pensions and welfare needs of older people. It has protested over winter death rates for UK pensioners and the problems faced by older private renters in Southwark as well as the closure of a local specialist mental health service for older people. Members also belong to other groups such as the Southwark Pensioners Forum (SPF), resulting in a friendly, active and lively group which encourages people to join. It is based at the premises of the Southwark Pensioners Centre (SPC) which has over 800 contacts and 20-plus affiliated groups and community organisations. More recent actions include an initiative by SPAG is to gather the stories of the over-50s during the Covid-19 pandemic.

SPAG participants had several objectives and a range of motives for developing their ICT skills most of which were directly connected to the roles they played in organisations such as charities. A flavour of the group's make-up can be gleaned from a sample of the SPAG participants, a mixture of women and men. For example, a woman, aged 70, who had worked with pensioners' organisations in Southwark for the previous 10 years and played a leading role in the celebration of the State Pension centenary, investigating local history and producing educational materials. She had been editor of the SPAG newsletter and had developed a wide range of skills during her career in education, including public speaking, writing and working in a team. She had been Chair of a local tenant's association, a trustee of Bermondsey Village Hall and also of Southwark Victim Support and a school governor. Before retirement she worked in education as a primary school head teacher for 22 years. She had a sight impairment causing difficulties when reading the computer screen.

One of the men was 92, had lived in south London for all his life and had only very recently come to ICT. His ICT skills were almost nonexistent, and he had advanced arthritis in both hands. Another participant, a woman in her 70s, had been active in a range of political and community groups and lived most of her adult life in South London. She was also fluent in three languages, English, French and German, and had worked extensively in the print industry as a proofreader and photo-typesetter. Because of her working background she had experienced the adverse impact of technical developments in the print industry. Since she also used technologies, including social media, at home, she had a fair degree of skill in ICT. These brief profiles indicate the group participating in the hands-on sessions was a mixture of ages (after all there are some 20 years

between someone aged 70 and a person aged 92), gender, skill level, and physical abilities. The common thread shared by all participants was a keen desire and determination to enhance their computer skills.

7.5 The Group Sessions and Individual Interview Processes

The first group discussion was a planning meeting in the Fox on the Hill pub on Denmark Hill, south east London. I had been invited to give a presentation at one of the monthly open meetings of SPAG and the planning meeting flowed from a request by SPAG members wanting to participate in the computer sessions. They felt that participation would be more productive with a planning meeting prior to the start of the sessions. Even at this early stage participants wanted to shape the nature of future discussions. Several reasons informed the participants' proposal to meet in the pub. It provided a relaxed atmosphere within which to discuss the research activities; it was geographically central to many members of the group; it was known to most of the group; and finally, was possible to reserve a quiet corner suitable for a large group. Following the principles of PAR, one of the participants approached the pub management to reserve the space which was indicated their desire to take ownership of the process. It may be that in other research programmes involving other participant groups, the choice of a pub may not be considered particularly appropriate. Refreshments provided were coffee, tea and sandwiches.

The initial group meeting agreed that the Southwark Pensioners Centre (SPC) should be approached by SPAG to book the computer room and for participants to negotiate with the management of the SPC over the cost of hiring. The frequency and length of each session should be decided at the first ICT session. SPAG members also agreed to design, print and circulate a flyer advertising the sessions, set up an email/telephone distribution list of those wishing to come to the sessions, and encourage and monitor attendance. Further, it was agreed that the dates and times of the sessions would be the product of a discussion between the SPAG end-users and me. These decisions to commit both personal and financial resources indicated a considerable commitment by participants to the project.

7.6 The Hands-on Sessions

Following from the discussions with the SPC, ICT training sessions were planned to run over a 15-month period with breaks arising from alternative commitments from the participants and myself. The sessions were undertaken in the windowless computer basement room of the SPC with eight networked personal computers using Windows XP with a networked inkjet printer and each having access to the internet running on Windows and using MS Office. Although

the content of each session varied, the structure was the same. Each session opened with a round table discussion focusing on three key themes: reflection on the previous session; activity undertaken by SPAG members between sessions; and the priorities for the current session. Post-session discussions, which were effectively an on-going critique of the process, enabled participants to reflect on their immediate experience; identify issues needing to be addressed in the next session and recommended activity members could undertake to both reinforce the learning and prepare for the next session. Participants numbers ranged from six to eight per session. Having obtained permission from the participants, the preview and review discussions were recorded on a digital recorder and, towards the end, were recorded on video. Although these discussions were initially researcher-led, once the routine had been established, the discussions quickly became participant-driven because of the familiarity the participants had with each other. This was encouraging since it indicated that the attempt to engender a PAR environment was successful.

The individual interviews were undertaken shortly after the end of the series of hands-on sessions and carried out at a time convenient to the interviewees. They were conducted in an environment with which they felt most comfortable with some in the Southwark Pensioners Centre, others in a cafe or at home. As with the group sessions, all the interviews, which lasted between 30 and 75 minutes, were digitally recorded. The purpose of these interviews was to allow participants to speak at length about their experiences with ICT and to critique the collective hands-on sessions. Luckily, one of the participants had been a photo-typesetter and agreed to transcribe the individual interviews and the hands-on sessions. This resulted in a significant amount of suitable material of both a collective and individual nature with the two different elements complementing each other.

7.7 The Basement Tapes

The conventional process for planning and undertaking ICT training sessions involves identifying learning outcomes before each session and tailoring the learning materials to match the learning outcomes. For the participant, the programme arrives pre-packaged, often with imperatives emanating from and reflecting the priorities of either the trainer or the programme's author, driving the learning programme. The pre-programme ability of the participants is determined through either an online assessment tool or the use of hard copy questionnaires focused on the skills and competencies of the participants. A programme's success is often measured by participants undertaking a series of set tasks or an end-of-unit assessment activity such as an online test.

In many instances the person responsible for designing the programme is not the person responsible for delivering it and the underpinning ethos is based on the need to deliver the required knowledge in the cheapest, fastest and most

tightly managed manner possible. Following a strict agenda, little, if any, time is set aside for the exploration and consideration of the programme by the participant or to engage in a wider appreciation or discussion about the technology. The learning sessions undertaken with the SPAG sought to break with this process.

No formal learning objectives were outlined at the programme's start and no attempt was made to determine the skill level of the participating group either before or after the programme. The approach resembled a problem-based learning strategy which enabled a high degree of input from the SPAG participants thus encouraging a greater sense of ownership of the process. The purpose was to create an environment that attempted to minimise possible manifestations of alienation. Some members of the group had anticipated that the programme would be like that of a more formal ICT training programmes and expressed concern that the structure of the sessions would be somewhat anarchic. However, at the same time they also knew, from their experience within SPAG, that a structure fostering a supportive and collaborative environment was important. These issues were discussed and resolved during the first meeting with participants.

The successful introductory meeting enabled more specific and substantial discussions about the technical details of organising the sessions. From the outset, it was agreed that the process involved in planning and undertaking the sessions should be very much user-driven and therefore needed a significant input from those who were likely to come to the hands-on sessions. There was a break of some 10 weeks between the end of the first round of hands-on sessions and the start of the second. However, the participants were keen to recommence the sessions and made it clear they had priorities including database design, image processing software, such as GIMP, social networking and blogs.

The data within this chapter include quotes from participants and sections of dialogue. The latter have been included because they buttress a number of aspects included in the discussion, and illuminate critical points occurring simultaneously. Each session has been allocated a number which has been used to identify quotes from the participants and so a quote from the participant called Marge in the third session review would be identified as follows: Marge 3R or Marge 3P if it occurred in a preview. Where a unit of dialogue is included in the text, the session or interview will be identified at the start of the quoted dialogue. While much of the data was collected by recording the previews and reviews of each session, there were limited opportunities to record partial discussions within the sessions themselves and these mainly arose when I was working in close quarters with one or two participants. Where there are quotes arising from discussions within sessions these are identified with an S. Data arising from individual interviews have been identified by PI. Thus, a quote made by Ron during an interview will be tagged as Ron PI. My contributions during dialogue extracts are tagged as 'Mike'. Having outlined the structure

of the programme, the discussion will now concentrate on the motivations of the participants. This will be followed by a summary of their expectations.

7.8 Motivations

For some participants, using ICT was a critical aspect of their lives. As Steve said *'Without my computer, I would be at a loss... I don't think I could live without it now'* (Steve 1P), a sentiment supported by another participant who, when asked how she would manage without her computer, replied, *'I would be both very upset and delighted'* (Marge 1P). This uncomfortable dependency on computers was, for some participants, the primary motivation for attending the sessions. For others, the motivation lay in simply getting started with computers to enable them to support their interests, with, for example, one saying, *'I'm involved with... small charities and I use financial records so spreadsheets can be quite useful'* (Dave 1P). He also was keen to use the internet for important tasks such as online shopping. While a few participants wanted to develop their skills for personal reasons, such as promoting better communication with other family members, all had a specific purpose for developing ICT skills which was directly connected to the roles they had in organisations such as charities or in offline communities such as family. Others felt it was simply a good way to develop their skills and to make it easier to manage the administration of SPAG.

As has been mentioned, initial discussions indicated some participants were expecting a traditional approach to the sessions and were concerned about what they saw as the apparently unstructured nature of the programme. Some had low expectations of the proposed programme because of their experiences of previous hands-on courses: *'I mean, they had loads of computers, very cramped, the computers, and they're all different ones, so you never got the same computer two weeks in a row and it was quite difficult'* (Steve 1R). Another said about a Quark course *'... and I got a certificate but it didn't teach me anything to be quite honest... it didn't teach me how to make a newsletter...'* (Marge PI). Apart from developing technical skills some also thought the proposed environment would be beneficial. Although Marge said she believed there had to be an instructor since *'... the software, the actual package... doesn't make it clear what you have to do!'* (Marge 2R). She was also clear that a different approach was beneficial: *'it was a contrast to other courses... much more user-friendly I would say...'* (Marge 1P).

As the programme progressed participants expressed changes in expectation both of themselves and the sessions. One participant said, *'The more you learn, the more you want to learn with this thing'* (Ron 6R). The content of the sessions also developed as the programme progressed and reflected a growing awareness within the group of the possibilities of the technology. In discussing

Google Docs, Jeannie said, ‘Well, if we can get people writing... it would save a lot of time. I can see how useful it could be’ (Jeannie 4R). Towards the end of the programme, the participants felt confident enough to want to use YouTube to make a video about changes to the UK health service and their impact on the older population. The participants were, in effect, taking greater control of the process and going way beyond the scheme of work initially envisaged for the activity. Having outlined the expectations participants had for the hands-on sessions, the discussion will now shift to see whether these hopes were met. In many respects this chapter has been the most difficult to write because it attempts to articulate, by way of description and subsequent analysis, a dynamic process in which many happenings occurred at the same moment. The struggle here has been to disentangle this myriad of interconnecting and interdependent threads and to present them in a coherent narrative while trying not to lose touch with the dynamic process.⁷

7.9 Alienated Attitudes Towards the Technology: A Shared Sentiment

The participants in this setting expressed a range of negative attitudes towards ICT and, predictably, they brought their experiences and sentiments concerning the technology into the hands-on sessions. One participant explained the impact a failure to login to Facebook had on her motivation ‘I have had this problem before. It makes me want to give up’ (Jeannie 7S). Another said ‘I saved up and bought a computer; it was always breaking down and not working. I got really fed-up... I mean, sometimes I feel like throwing the computer out of the window’ (Marge PI).

As the following comment from one participant indicates, these feelings can express themselves in physical symptoms.

Today I put in my username but when I put in my password, I was 100 per cent sure I was absolutely right, it wouldn’t accept it. So that makes me... *it tires me out enormously in frustration* and it didn’t ask me when... I then admitted that I obviously couldn’t find my password, it didn’t ask me for my security word either (Ron 2R, my italics).

This quote shows that at the same moment Ron felt three interdependent things: a lack of control, frustration, and a sense that the computer should solve the problem. All three stressful experiences were expressed in a physical sense of tiredness.

These negative moments can also lead end-users to turn inwards resulting in declarations of self-denigration, as one participant said: ‘I just want to do... social networking... because I haven’t got a clue... I don’t know why but I just feel at such a loss when everybody else can do things that I can’t do’ (Jeannie 9P). They

can also induce a sense of struggle, with the computer being seen as the enemy. As one participant said when talking about trying to use Internet Explorer to find files, *'Very difficult to find anything on it. I think I will succeed; we shall be victorious'* (Steve 5R).

At this point it could appear that the perceptions of the SPAG participants emanated from within this particular group of people or the specific context. However, evidence collected from settings described in chapters 4 and 5 indicate that the scholars and ICT professionals share similar sentiments to those of SPAG members. As one ICT professional said in discussing problems with the technology, *'the problems come when it doesn't work... I can spend hours trying to solve problems... I feel irritated but not suicidal'* (M1 Project Manager). He added that when the company's network goes down it is the most frustrating experience. In describing technologies associated with networking, one scholar said that *'the inconvenience and annoyance of having expectations of technology of bringing us together and [it] doesn't work... that drives me nuts'* (ME1 US). Another, in discussing a software problem, said, *'I was actually thinking "God, I must be doing something really stupid here"... I was really struggling'* (FE EU). Others expressed deep feelings of alienation with one commenting, *'You feel completely out of control because you think you had control but now it doesn't work, and you don't have control'* (FE SA). Another said, *'the adjective would be powerless. You wish there was something you could do but cannot figure a way out of the box'* (ME3 US). One ICT professional said, *'if you can't fix things yourself, you have to phone the support people this can be... onerous and tiresome'* (M2 Software engineer). This sentiment strongly echoes that expressed by Ron in the above quote.

This evidence underscores the view that ICT provokes a range of reactions that are remarkably consistent across the three sets of participants in this study indicating that the feelings fostered using ICT expressed by the participants in a working context covered in chapters 5 and 6 are also evident in a non-working environment. This reinforces the argument that it is possible to speak of alienation in an abstract manner existing across multiple contexts but, because of mediation, its manifestation is rooted in a specific circumstance. Therefore, investigating the specific context is important for understanding what causes alienation to come to the surface, allows it to be observed and reveals how it takes its practical form. Having looked at the commonality of sentiments shared across the three settings, the discussion will now focus on those issues directly linked to alienation as it relates to ICT and SPAG participants starting with a look at aspects of control.

7.10 Who's this Technology Designed For?

Products and processes determined by external agents were highly significant for participants in the previous two settings and revolved around outcomes and

processes as related to their work environment. In this setting however, these related more directly to specific ICT resources.

The inconsistency of available software across the machines was a problem particularly if people wanted to work together using different machines. During the early stages this did not present any significant barriers to learning because the skill level of some participants was relatively low. However, it did become a major issue towards the end of the programme when participant skill levels had increased. The variation in software available across different computers also impacted on the relationships between participants because it became a serious impediment to enhancing a collective way of working. This fed into a discussion about the group establishing its IT priorities and about how to progress these with the management of the SPC. There was a very strong desire within the group for each person to be able to undertake the work required for SPAG and there was recognition that the computer room at the SPC was a critical enabling factor. There was also a firm belief that management might resist, for funding reasons, improvements in ICT facilities. As the exchange below, from the third session review, indicates, control over resources even has implications on the choice of mouse:

Dave: At the end I was using the ball on the mouse. It was much easier.

Mike: Or maybe we could get another one then. Could we ask for another mouse like that?

Jeannie: I don't know. You'd have to ask someone upstairs. It isn't my area.

Mike: Maybe somebody could ask the folk who provide the hardware, can they provide another mouse? If that's easier to use...

Ron: Yes. It'd be down here, wouldn't it, if it was possible to use it would be down here in this room, wouldn't it?

Dave: They might have one locked away.

On a general level, the discussion about alienation from the technology tends to focus on the impact of computers, but for the SPAG participants the costs involved in maintaining peripherals such as printers are also of serious concern. The following conversation, during the fifth session review, reveals the anger and resentment about the cost of replacing colour cartridges:

Jeannie: What's in here is more expensive than gold. Well, not quite. £150 worth of bloody cartridges. £150 is a bloody complete rip-off.

Steve: Yes, because you buy the expensive ones, don't you?

Jeannie: I've tried other ones and it's quite difficult. I really do feel like changing my printer soon.

Marge: You get four cartridges for £130?

Jeannie: It's five. I mean, the colour ones are about £30, £35, and the black ones are about £20.

Marge: How much use do you get out of them?

Jeannie: Not a lot. I've got two colour ones here and I've got three black. This'll last me three or four months and then I'll have to get some more.

Marge: My thing [printer] you put the separate colours in and I seem to end up with loads and loads and loads of yellow ones.

The last comment appears to show that for these ICT users the provision of print cartridges is part of the irritating overall ICT tapestry they experience and have to cope with. Seemingly simple things, like having the correctly shaped mouse or being able to afford print cartridges, become serious impediments to the full use of ICT.

Another issue that emerged during the conversations related to their perceptions of how the software works and for whom it is designed. The following dialogue, during the fourth session (4S), indicates they consider the software to have been created for others; for those, unlike them, who know what they are doing:

Mike: So what's this software designed for? What is this designed for?

Marge: People who already know what they're doing.

Mike: So... do you feel in control when you're sitting in front of the screen?

Ron: Not really, no.

Mike: How about you, Ron?

Ron: No. No, not really, no. You feel that you're going to get there, you know, but at the moment you're not in control.

Dave: We're just doing what we're told by you.

Marge: And the reason we have to have an instructor is that the software, the actual package that this teaching is it doesn't make it... clear what you've got to do.

This dialogue suggests that the group saw themselves as separate from other users of ICT and far from being in control of the software they were using. The final two comments are also evidence that they saw me as separate from them. I was the one in control and an 'other' despite my attempts to create an environment designed to minimise expressions of alienation. Further, a whole set of relationships is revealed in this exchange between the creators of technology (hard and soft) and these specific end-users; between the participants and me; and the participants' own sense of self. Having looked at some of the aspects of control experienced by the SPAG members, the

discussion will now move to consider how these participants responded to this situation.

7.11 Consequences of Lack of Control

The response of SPAG participants to these, took several forms, ranging from anger in the form of abuse hurled at the computer through to fatalism with a touch of self-criticism thrown in for good measure. These themes are addressed in the following sections. Getting cross at the computer was exhibited by all participants (but is something with which many of us are familiar) but, as the dialogue below from a personal interview demonstrates, for some participants, anger and criticism of the technology was at times palpable and could be articulated quite sharply and humorously:

Marge[PI]: Yes. I end up just shouting at the computer, which is not much help really.

Mike: Why do you shout at the computer?

Marge: Well, because I'm angry that I can't do what I want to do. And that's... my view is, if you want to know my honest opinion, I believe that all machines are part of a universal conspiracy against me personally. Well, and against other people but particularly against me.

Mike: You mean out of 6.7 billion people they've got their sights on you?

Marge: Yes, I feel like that.

Mike: You feel like that?

Marge: Yes. I know it's silly, but I do feel like that, yes.

This extract shows that while Marge appreciates, on an intellectual level, that it does not make sense to believe she is a personal target of computers; she nonetheless feels this to be the case. For her, even if she doesn't really believe it, this offers some explanation for the failure of machines, not the underlying relations represented by the physical presence of the computer, to meet her requirements. The adverse emotional impact of the 'machine' has been the subject of many a book or film, for example the *Terminator* franchise or Orwell's 1984. Other participants indicated the adverse impact the technology has when expectations are not met, with one commenting, when talking about an unfulfilled task relating to emails '*Well I do send it to her, but I don't know if she's got it. There's a real problem here. This makes me cross. This is not good*' (Jeannie 5P). This desire to scream, even if silently, at an inanimate object made of plastic and metal is, in effect, a scream at a whole set of relations mediated through and embodied in the technology and over which the end-users have no control.

The irritation with the technology was manifested in the hands-on sessions in one instance and occurred during a discussion in the 5th session concerning a database containing the SPAG membership records. This database had been mentioned on a few occasions before and had been giving the SPAG officers some problems; thus, this database had its history. In the following dialogue, bold font has been used to impart the tone and volume of the exchange:

- Mike: So, this is a query result, is it?
- Jeannie: No, this is the actual Table. This is the whole database, and this tells you who's a member of this centre. I just want to redo some of the queries, and we want to get rid of 2008.
- Mike: When you say queries, what do you mean?
- Steve: **The headings.**
- Mike: You mean you want to change the column headings?
- Jeannie: **Yes, but they're queries, aren't they? They are called queries on the database.**
- Mike: No.
- Jeannie: They are.
- Steve: **It doesn't matter what they're called. We want to change the headings.**
- Jeannie: **Can we have a quick look? I'll just go and show you what I mean. Because if not we're talking different languages. This is the one that's got my thing in.**
- Mike: Ok. [At this point a sense of moderation emerged leading to an ease of tension.]
- Jeannie: Sorry, did I pick some...
- Mike: No, it's not a problem. Not a problem. I mean, we might be talking about the same thing.

Although the above exchange was relatively brief, it was highly charged, with tension and frustration especially between Jeannie and Steve which was clearly linked to the problems they had previously encountered with the database. While no one shouted loudly during this exchange the voices were raised. As well as anger, other negative sentiments were linked to the technology.

Fatalism, or an attitude of resignation, was expressed by some of the participants. As one put it: *'It does take a long time and sometimes I don't get anywhere. It takes an incredibly long time... anyway there we are'* (Ron 2P). Self-criticism was a recurring theme in discussions within the sessions which were peppered with comments such as *'You don't know a lot before you sit down there. I don't'* (Ron 2R). Having looked at issues and implications concerned with a lack of control over the technology, the chapter will now consider the benefits of the hands-on sessions.

7.12 Practical Benefits of the Hands-on Sessions

The benefits of the basement sessions as described by the participants centred on a number of themes: the development of specific ICT skills; collaboration; control of the technology; the learning process; and transferable skills. Some of these benefits had not been anticipated at the start of the programme. As participants started the programme with varying levels of skills, it was not expected that all would reach the same point at the conclusion of the sessions. Consequently, it was not considered appropriate that skill levels should be measured through the application of a structured assessment device. Evidence for progress was obtained during the preview and review exchanges and therefore flowed naturally from the discussions during these periods; in effect a form of self-and-peer-assessment. As one participant said, *'Well, I made a bit more progress on spreadsheets... it's slow going because there is only one of you [ie one trainer]... but I am learning a lot'* (Dave4R).

As the following dialogue from the second session review shows, the feeling that progress was evident from early in the programme:

- Dave: I really want to press on with it.
 Tony: Yes, I'm looking forward to the next one.
 Ron: Oh yes, yes, I found it quite useful. Indeed, I have.

Later in this same discussion, Tony comments: *'I think I have done pretty well. But I've got to know more about the things you press on the keyboard'* (Tony 2R). This indicates that he understood his progress in two ways: he was developing his technical skills and his appreciation of what the technology has to offer. In talking about the design and development of databases using MS Access, one said, *'Now you have side-stepped this tutorial thing [an online facility], I have already learnt far more than I learnt at a previous training'* (Marge 6R). The relatively more experienced SPAG ICT users were encouraged by the programme to explore aspects of the technology they had previously ignored. As Jeannie said, *'It was the first time I'd actually really used YouTube and I was gobsmacked. My god, so much is on it, isn't it? It's so amazing!'* (Jeannie 4R).

The sessions also encouraged those, like Dave and Ron, who did not have a personal computer, to use computer facilities in other parts of Southwark: *'Yes, I spent an hour... in the library. It was brilliant'* (Tony 5P). They also signed up for free ICT courses in the borough. This sense of progress reached right over to the end of the programme when Tony told me that he now had an email address and was sending and receiving emails.⁸

The concluding task was initiated and undertaken by the group at the end of the programme focused on making a video, to be posted online, about opposing cuts in the UK health service and was planned and scripted by members of SPAG. Apart from reflecting the ethos of SPAG as a campaigning organisation, the completion of this task enhanced knowledge of the networking facilities

on the Web and employed the use of appropriate hardware and software. This activity underlines the enhanced skill levels experienced by the participants in the programme. The following sections look at benefits that are often described as intangible and opens with a look at collaboration.

7.13 Intangible Benefits

From the outset, it was evident that the group saw the success of the activity as being achieved through collective effort with, for example, Steve agreeing to help Dave use the computer facilities at a local library during the first exploratory meeting. The following dialogue, from the 6th session review, shows the high degree of support the participants gave each other:

Jeannie: It's quite interesting when you haven't done anything before and you haven't even done any typing. To go right back to that I would find it impossible. I don't know how you do it.

Steve: I think it just shows you how.

Marge: I think it's fantastic, Ron.

Tony: It's quite interesting when you get into it. It's like a book. I mean, a good book, you forget that the time's going round a bit...

In response to one of the participants saying he has to wait for the trainer to be free, another one said, *'We can always help you. Can I make a suggestion? I think he (Dave) is having great difficulty with the ball. They are much more difficult to use than the mouse'* (Steve 4R). This intervention indicates that by this time Steve wants to solve the problem, show his knowledge, help the other participants and has good observation skills. He sees the success of the other as important to him because it confirms the positive experience he is sharing.

The supportive, sharing environment was also important to those participants who were more familiar with the technology for, as one said in talking about an environment conducive to asking questions, *'... you've got to be in a situation where you don't feel threatened at asking something, because a lot of people do... this idea that you are actually... all taking part in it (sharing) our knowledge, it is so much more productive'* (Jeannie PI). Furthermore, the collective atmosphere encouraged individual participants to see the others as people with whom they were sharing the same journey. As Dave commented, *'I think that what I'd like to do is surf the net using a mouse because like Ron, I've got to get lots of practice in'* (Dave PI). The collaborative environment also had a positive impact on my sense of my role in the programme. In the middle of one session, I thought the process was running out of steam and needed to reflect on how things were going. This led to the following exchange, during the sixth session review, indicating that the collective environment also encouraged me to feel comfortable about sharing my self-criticisms:

Mike: Shall I tell you what I thought about today?

Jeannie: So tell us.

Mike: It looked like at one point it didn't have any structure...I was uncertain... but looking around... I was thinking Dave is getting on doing what he's... he's working on his own, which is, like, if you think about where we started, what we wanted...

Jeannie: Yes.

Mike: And then you two are working together and it seems to be working quite ok.

Jeannie: Yes, as long as I didn't put Ron off. I keep taking over.

Mike: ...there were people on machines all working away and it's... like the session had its own sort of structure, which I thought was ok.

Jeannie: Well, we've all got bits that we need help on, haven't we?

Marge: Well, I mean, I've already... this has been far more useful than anything else I've done really.

There are a number of things this exchange reveals. The traditional relationship between the ICT trainer and trainees has been undermined and replaced with a much more interactive, supportive relationship: a less functional, more organic relationship had emerged by this point. Secondly, it signifies that some of the 'trainees' had become trainers. Finally, it also shows the process employed during these sessions was highly regarded by the participants because it had useable practical outcomes.

In discussing the reasons why there was a strong culture of support within the sessions, one participant said, *'It's because of the idea that you started off with, that it should be for us to try and structure the course... It has drawn us closer together, that whole kind of idea of it, of us being in control really'* (Marge PI). It has already been noted that participants were intimately involved from the start in planning the length, timing and content of the sessions and took responsibility for organising the venue, producing a flyer advertising the programme and reminding participants to attend. It has also been recorded that a mutually supportive environment was evident from the very start of the programme. Apart from the one incident alluded to above, a spirit of collaboration and collective endeavour infused the sessions.

Mention has been made above of the negative consequences arising from the lack of control over the technology. The data indicates that the members of the programme sought to deal with this problem as it was manifested in three areas: the development of relationships within the group; the programme content; and control over the technology. Each of these aspects is covered in the following discussion. The following dialogue, which occurred towards the end

of the third session, indicates the development of several positive trends within the group pertinent to this issue. It shows the group was beginning to be more assertive in the activity and also reveals the growing confidence of individuals within the group both in themselves and with each other.

- Dave: Right, well, I must be making tracks. How do I turn this off?
Just press the...?
- Mike: Well, Cerene, will you tell Dave how to turn it off?
- Cerene: Fat chance... Which one have you been working on? This one here?
- Mike: Cerene...you tell him what to do, don't you do it... See if you can remember what he is supposed to do. [Cerene shows Dave how to close down the computer.]
- Mike: (to everyone) Cerene has just given... a lesson... [Clapping from the others in the group] to someone on how to turn off the machine.
- Marge: And did he do it right?
- Cerene: Yes.
- Marge: There you go, I say.
- Cerene: Thank you.

The participants felt they were exerting much greater control over the hands-on sessions both in terms of skill application and content: *'I've got an idea now... about the purpose of database and how it actually works which I didn't really understand at all'* (Marge 6R). This increased confidence also led to increased assertiveness in determining content: *'I would like some help next week with looking at that wretched database... then I can get the hell out of it...'* (Jeannie 6R).

The preview and review periods were very important parts of the process and also allowed for a much wider consideration of ICT and society with SPAG members taking the lead in these discussions. In one instance, initiated and led by one of the participants, concerned a TV programme called *Inside the Virtual Anthill* about free and open source software. She concluded by saying that *'it was quite a revelation to me about what is going on... it was saying that quite a few firms are using this rather than Microsoft'* (Jeannie 4R). This opened a debate about the question of using open source in the Southwark Pensioners Centre.

7.14 Barriers

As the programme developed and participants perceived the range of possibilities available with the technology, they also began to be aware of those factors preventing the realisation of these possibilities. They became increasingly

aware of the barriers they faced with technology generally and more specifically as it related to their immediate circumstances. Consequently, they decided to approach the management of the Centre to request an update of the computer facilities. How this should be progressed formed the focus of a preview discussion in December 2010: *'We have to talk to the management about updating the software and we want it done in the way we need'* (Jeannie R11). Following a debate within the group about the best way to proceed, the consensus was that this should concern the technology they, and other users of the Centre, could control and use without impediment. The view was also expressed that this should be the same for all users of the Centre. This was a very sensitive area for the participants, and during this discussion, for the first and only time, I was asked to turn off the digital recorder. One participant later explained that she felt that enhancing the computer facilities was determined by the personality of the Centre manager when she said the current manager is approachable whereas the one before *'seemed like she wanted to control everything, felt she was doing us a favour by being there'* (Marge PI).

The request to temporarily cease recording the conversation meant that the discussion, which developed into an interesting description of and the consequences arising from the complex power relationships within the Centre determining access to the technology, did not become part of the data collection. It was a sharp reminder that while we could determine the structure and content of the sessions, understanding the technology had to include an appreciation of the impact of external power relations. Whilst outlining the limitations participants had over control of the technology, the above discussion also indicates that both change and continuity existed at the same time during the programme: change, in that participants felt they were developing greater confidence over issues such as session content and skill level as the programme progressed; and continuation in the growing recognition that there were significant aspects of the process over which they had little influence. The practical activity of participating in the course began to generate an understanding of the underlying relations that determined how they experienced ICT. Thus, the dialogue above concerning the managerial issues within the Centre emphasises a process where a sense of progression, regarding hands-on skill enhancement, existed alongside a developing appreciation of their alienation from the technology. Thus, a contradictory process could be observed: the more knowledgeable the participants became about ICT, the greater their awareness of their lack of knowledge about the technology and its underlying power relations.

The sessions had been designed to limited expressions of alienation, but as the following exchange shows, it continued to be expressed even at a late stage in the process: *'We have had a bit of a frustrating day today with machines not running properly, software behaving unpredictably... very frustrating'* (Mike R10), and old frustrations of the participants re-emerged: *'Oh for XXXX sake, what is going on here... why has that disappeared?'* (Marge S10).

7.15 Unanticipated Developments

Several positive developments referred to above had been anticipated since they mirror those found in other PAR informed activity. However, there were several unanticipated outcomes that materialised from the hands-on sessions. One was the emergence of those seeking to adopt the role of a trainer in helping with both technical issues and initiating discussions about the wider societal implications of ICT. The following dialogue is a good example of the former, and took place directly after Cerene had shown Dave how to turn off his computer:

- Mike: Now, Dave, you will need to show Ron how to turn the machine off.
 Ron: That's this button here, isn't it?
 Dave: Click on START.
 Ron: I've done that.
 Dave: There we are then. After you click, go to TURN OFF COMPUTER. Click. Got that. Click....
 Dave: Then you come up here.
 Ron: Oh dear, oh lor! Yes, it's going off.
 Mike: Dave has just given his first lesson as a trainer.
 Marge: And they're all much more patient than me.

In the event, it became the accepted practice within sessions for participants to seek and offer assistance from each other.

Another pleasant surprise resulting from the sessions was that they encouraged participants to adopt a more self-reflective manner about their use of ICT. One striking example of this was Marge. During the second session preview she said, *'I shouldn't get so impatient with Ron, but he doesn't keep his eye on where the mouse is going!'* (Marge 2R). It will also be recalled from a previous section that Marge tended to be quite aggressive towards her machine. However, as the following extract from her interview shows, the programme had a beneficial impact on her behaviour both towards the machines and people.

- Marge: But it has, there are a couple of things it has helped me with. One is, er, helping teach Ron how to use the machines. And I was very impatient with him and ended up shouting at him a couple of times. And because there were other people there, and you especially pointed out to me that I was, that it would be better if I was more patient, I have actually changed my way of operating. I'm quite glad of that...
- Mike: Did you ever feel like hitting the machine in the SPAG sessions?
- Marge: No. Well, no, I didn't actually, now you come to say that.
- Mike: Did you ever feel you wanted to shout at the machine in the SPAG sessions?

- Marge: Yes. Particularly when I put a memory stick in and nothing happened.
- Mike: But did you shout?
- Marge: I think I did, yes. I didn't swear. Once or twice, but nothing like when I'm here.
- Mike: Like when you're here on your own?
- Marge: Yes.

Participation in a collective, supportive, non-competitive learning environment was enabling Marge to recognise, understand and moderate her impatient attitude towards technology.

A third unforeseen development was the social function the sessions began to play, with one participant commenting, *'Apart from the learning thing, it's a social activity and I am quite happy for it to go on forever and ever'* (Ron 10R), a response shared by other participants, as the following dialogue illustrates:

- Marge: I'll add something to that. Ron's wife died last year and I think this has actually given him...
- Mike: Ah.
- Marge: ...a sort of new lease of life, if you like, really. Yes. Well it's bound to, you know.
- Mike: Crikey Moses.

As the last comment shows, I was astonished at this revelation for two reasons. Firstly, I had not at all expected the programme would take on such a strong social hue. Secondly, Marge's comments provided a much deeper insight into the importance of the sessions for the participants than I had anticipated and previously not understood; they had begun to fulfil a more profound social role.

7.16 Analysis

The evidence presented at the start of the chapter shows the participants' dissatisfaction with the technology, expressed in a number of ways, and indicates they shared the same views as the participants in the other settings. Their responses to this dissatisfaction offered both a coping strategy for dealing with the difficulties they encountered and provided an explanation for why things will not work. On one level, with fatalism, it is something out there, beyond one's control that creates the problem. At another level, with self-criticism, the problem lies within a person, but it too is not possible to resolve. These two contradictory manifestations of alienation reside within the same intellectual and emotional space. The evidence therefore confirms that this group of participants experience alienation. The questions to be addressed here are: how does this alienation manifest itself in this specific context and to what extent can it be ameliorated?

As noted in in previous chapters, key aspects of Marx's notion of alienation concerns the labour-capital relation and its impact on outcomes, processes, and relationships. Since in this setting there are no direct outcomes, the focus has been on issues linked to process and to consider their impact on social relationships. Evidence gathered from this setting indicates that it is possible to engage with the adverse consequences of alienation and in doing so, foster a range of countervailing impulses. The data highlights several relevant themes in this process, namely collaboration, absence of competition, taking control, and locating ICT training in the needs of the participants. Each of these themes is explored in the following analysis.

A significant element of Marx's notion of alienation is the threat of the 'other'. In the hands-on sessions it was evident that within the group dynamic there was no fear of the 'other' in the form of other participants. On the contrary, the process employed, encouraged and enabled a strong appreciation that collaboration and mutual support would be extremely beneficial for the success of the activity. Moreover, the evidence indicates that this reached beyond the SPAG members and eventually impacted on me in my role as trainer. All the participants contributed to creating a culture that valued the work of the 'other' and cultivated an intimate relationship between the individual and the group. Each participant had their own individual needs, yet these were met by the group working together as a whole. Consequently, the significant absence was any competitive environment. In some ways this echoes, but in more definite and focused manner, the supportive environment some academics mentioned when referring to scholarly networks.

The data also shows that, as the programme progressed, other objectives developed organically with the activity with session content extending well beyond learning a new range of technical skills and beginning to encompass a much wider range of subjects which then posed additional questions for the participants relating to the societal implications of ICT. The evidence presented substantiates the view that, in this specific context, the emphasis on collaboration offered a glimpse of an alternative to the fatalistic or self-denigrating positions relating to the technology and provided an avenue through which issues connected with taking control of the technology could be explored. The collective approach encouraged participants to make demands on the programme that arose directly from the activity and the way this was undertaken. Their relationship to the technology shifted as they became more aware of the nature of this relationship and as it set in train a process of creating or modifying existing relationships within the group. The data also provides insights into the shift in perspective by some participants in that they increasingly saw ICT as critical to the aims they wished to pursue rather than being something separate from them and not belonging to them. For other, more experienced users, the process helped engender a more self-reflective view and highlighted certain modes of behaviour.

However, the data also indicates that, while the issues concerning the control of the sessions were addressed by the participants, external agency influence on

the technology remained unresolved at two levels: the local level which focused on the SPC, and the global level relating to software and hardware in general. This created a contradiction based on what was wanted and expected, and what was available and could be delivered both locally and globally. The ongoing discussions related to the technical resources for the group and the difficulties encountered in seeking to ameliorate these emphasise the overarching level of alienation within which this group activity took place. In the first instance, trying to improve the computer facilities in the Centre, meant engaging with a management that determined the allocation of a budget (which was determined elsewhere) and accountable ultimately not to the users but to another 'other', higher body. The second, technical problem, over which the participants had no control whatsoever and often mentioned in the sessions, concerned the creation and development of the software itself. Here the 'other' had complete control. This tension also brought into relief a much wider question about external constraints in general as was indicated by the discussions on free and open-source software.

The data also shows that this contradiction had several profound impacts. The experiences within the group can be described as being of both change and continuity. Change can be identified as the possibility of engaging in a form of practice that challenges manifestations of alienation even if that challenge is restricted to a specific time and place. Continuity meant the programme could not step out of the general alienated environment within which life is lived. The second consequence is that the process of change was not linear. When difficulties arose in later parts of the programme, they provoked a reference back to alienated attitudes evident before and at the start of the process. The final problem with the programme was that while it was successful in making participants aware of issues of alienation and ICT, and was able to address some of these issues at a very concrete and local level, it was not able to overcome the wider context which fosters alienation. This has implications for discussions concerning autonomy and ICT.

This chapter has been concerned with applying Marx's theory of alienation in a non-work situation and has sought to test if the theory has any value in constructing and carrying through a research programme in such a context. It has also been concerned with exploring what possible strategies or coping mechanisms people can utilise to manage the problems associated with alienation. An attempt was made to offset these negative experiences by constructing, by using PAR, an environment within which the alienation often associated with ICT could be identified and challenged. The evidence and the subsequent analysis have shown that while it is possible to engage in activity that can confront alienation in a specific and concrete context, there are more fundamental problems concerning the nature of ICT that cannot be resolved by these engagements alone.