Perspectives from the Field: It Takes a Village to Raise a Clubhouse

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In this chapter, whose title is inspired by the West African proverb "it takes a village to raise a child," we turn to the people in the Clubhouse Network, the community-based organizations, and the coordinators who run the Clubhouses around the world. While the social, creative, and technological skills employed and learned by Clubhouse members (described in later chapters) are often central to discussions about the benefits of Computer Clubhouses, it is also clear that the coordinators and community organizations at the local level and the Network staff at the organizational level play an equally important part by supporting these endeavors.

We conducted interviews with several Computer Clubhouse coordinators in the United States and abroad, as well as with community leaders and Network administrators (see Table I.1 for a summary of Computer Clubhouse sites featured throughout this book). Our goal was to distill themes of the often intangible aspects involved in supporting and growing the Clubhouse while maintaining its vision. It is impossible to do justice to the numerous aspects that were raised in these conversations so we decided to focus on the following themes: the Computer Clubhouse learning model and what makes it different from other organizations; what it means to be a Clubhouse coordinator in different places around the world; the Clubhouse's role in and contributions to local communities; and how the administration maintains its vision across the Clubhouse Network.

"A COMPUTER CLUBHOUSE IS NOT A COMPUTER LAB"

Gail Breslow, the Network director, put it aptly when she said that Computer Clubhouses are not like any other community technology center or after-school program. Just focusing on the technology alone would be misleading. While technology is key—as the name Computer Clubhouse already implies—technology alone would not be sufficient to realize a successful Clubhouse. So when Brenda Abanavas, a member of the Network staff, noted that "I know instantly when I

walk in the door, whether in Atlanta or Belfast, I'm in a Computer Clubhouse," she referred to more than just the presence of a green table and computers. From the outside, Computer Clubhouses share many features of other after-school programs and community technology centers that can be found across the United States and abroad: They have a designated space, they have a coordinator, and they may even have tutors or mentors. But a Clubhouse somehow seems different. The people who have grown and supported successful Clubhouses worldwide offer their insights into the essence of a Clubhouse.

Patricia Díaz, a member of the Network staff, spoke of the adaptability of the learning model being a major factor contributing to Clubhouse success:

> If you want to be [a] Clubhouse, I think it's because you want to embrace the Clubhouse learning model. Now, there are many differences in terms of the actual implementation, but I think those are minor as compared to the essence of the model. So things as trivial as the green table being red in Colombia because green tables weren't standardized when they started—they are still a Computer Clubhouse because they are still learning by designing, they are still a community of learning, and kids explore their own interests. So I think that's way more important and prevalent everywhere in the Network, even if some kids sit on folding chairs and some kids sit on the floor.

Community support prevalent across the Network is driven by partnerships with local, community-based organizations. Host organizations provide the critical link between the needs of a local community and the resources offered by the Network. Host organizations are also responsible for the longevity of their sites, ensuring that funding opportunities and community awareness are communicated to key stakeholders. Many coordinators have voiced how the commitment of their host organization to promoting their Clubhouse is imperative to a successful program. Lee Betton, a community-based organizer responsible for support of six Clubhouses in Fairfax County, Virginia, remarked, "My job is to never be in my office, but to always be at the Clubhouse or in the [executive] offices, or some function talking about the Clubhouse—what they do, and how they [engage] with their local community." These efforts of host organizations translate into increased community support and stronger guarantees that Clubhouses will be a constant resource for youth in their formative years as they develop identities and interests.

Another crucial ingredient to what makes the Clubhouse model unique is the presence of dedicated mentors. Whether adults or other youth, Clubhouse mentors help define the quality of the learning experience for its members. Brenda Abanavas, a member of the Network staff, points to the caliber of volunteers needed at a Clubhouse:

> First of all, I dispel the myth that because you need a volunteer means you take anybody who says that they want to volunteer. It's not true. I feel as though when I have a volunteer that works with me, this has to

be a person who is committed to giving 100+% of themselves, as if they were hired to do that. I look for people who have a mixture of talent and technical skills. I don't necessarily need someone who has years of knowledge in animation, for example, but I want people who'd like to expose themselves to it and to learn enough to excite young people to explore it on their own.

Karen Ellis of the Network staff notes that the Clubhouse Network has invested heavily in mentoring because of its importance to the success of a Clubhouse: "We've created tools like a mentoring toolkit for Clubhouse staff and also for mentors and then created a presence on the Village where our Clubhouses from around the world could talk to each other about mentoring, exchange information and resources, and encourage each other to find mentors.

CLUBHOUSE COORDINATOR: MORE THAN A FULL-TIME JOB

One of the requirements for each Clubhouse is to have a full-time coordinator. As Louise Feeney, the Clubhouse coordinator from Belfast, reports, "The job of a Computer Clubhouse coordinator is just go, go, go! There is so much to do in one day and no one day is the same." Being a Clubhouse coordinator provides her the opportunity to combine her passion for creativity and her interest in education. She says that she is "constantly learning new software and exploring new ideas with young talented thinkers. I have the opportunity to use technology to empower young people." While this is a full-time job in itself, Natashka Jones, the Clubhouse coordinator in Los Angeles, conveys that her position extends beyond the four walls of the Computer Clubhouse by doing such things as going to the schools, checking report cards, and occasionally making visits to the members' homes when they're having trouble at home. She adds, "The role of a coordinator is like a surrogate parent. You become a mentor. You become a best friend. You become a teacher. You become a leader." Other coordinators extend their efforts beyond their official job descriptions in a similar manner. Luversa Sullivan, the Clubhouse coordinator for the Tacoma Clubhouse, recounts that there was a young man at her Clubhouse whose mother had abandoned the family long before. Child Protective Services had taken the young man, making both him and his younger brother wards of the state—moving in and out of different homes, only able to stay 2 months at most, and then moving on to some other home until they found a more permanent situation. Despite the fluctuations in where he slept, ate, and went to school, the young man was able to find familiarity in the Tacoma Clubhouse. Sullivan noted that "the courts thought that this was an important thing for his development. In order to make this happen, the young man and I went with his court-ordered papers in my briefcase. He was frightened and the state knew that there had to be something to give this baby hope or we were going to lose him."

Not only is the Clubhouse Coordinator position vital to the individual success of particular members, the position is essential to the success of the Clubhouse

itself. As Karen Ellis conveys, "The success of a Clubhouse is so dependent on the staff, on the connections they can make with their young people and mentors." However, identifying appropriate staff to fill this position can be a challenge. So what do Network staff and community organizers look for during the hiring process? The answer might be somewhat surprising to anyone thinking that it all boils down to in-depth knowledge of information technologies. When asked how best to staff a Clubhouse, Clubhouse practitioners answered, "[Hire] people with a willingness to be open, available, and free with their thoughts. The Clubhouse then becomes a place where doing things, building things, working with youth, and being open to ideas and possibilities result from these kinds of learning relationships. That is how a Clubhouse springs to life." This often means hiring individuals with limited technology expertise but a passion for learning and working with youth. Then Clubhouse Network staff support local Clubhouse coordinators with start-up training about the learning model as well as software applications, ongoing support, online resources on the Village such as a mentoring toolkit and project ideas, site visits and collaborations among local Clubhouse clusters, professional development experiences such as the Annual Conference, regional activities, and—though intended primarily for youth—the Teen Summit, which provides a chance for the entire Clubhouse community to learn from each other. In spite of all this support, it starts with finding the right people for the job.

One of the most important, yet challenging, jobs of any Clubhouse coordinator is to grow and support a culture of design and creativity in the Clubhouse space. While it is a common goal, each coordinator goes about this in a somewhat unique way. For some, the outside mentors and unwavering commitment to the four Guiding Principles of the Clubhouse model largely determine the Clubhouse design culture. For others, peers play a strong role in promoting and developing a design culture. As Suha Al Syouf, the Clubhouse coordinator from the Amman Clubhouse, says, "Let them teach each other, not by forcing, but by guiding them to show others how they could make it better if they work together. The idea of team sprit is very important." Other Clubhouse coordinators take a similar approach. The Tacoma Clubhouse coordinator, Luversa Sullivan, adds her tips for engaging youth who are unfamiliar with the Clubhouse model:

> As youth come into the Clubhouse, they're greeted by other, more experienced Clubhouse members. Most youth at this point are unsure of what they want to do. So the members as well as the coordinator will pose questions, probing the new members for preexisting interests, "Okay, what are you interested in? Are you interested in art? Do you like to draw? Do you like music? Do you like beats?" Once they are able to figure out what they like, the coordinator then views it as her job to show them how the new members' interests connect to other domains, such as taking a drawing and placing a blue screen in back of it to make an animation.

Toward these ends Clubhouse coordinators are unafraid to use popular software, like Harmonix's Rock Band, to capture the youths' initial attention and in-

spire them to build their own rock bands or videogames in programs like Scratch, a unique visual programming software that was initially created for Clubhouse youth to mix their own media (see Chapter 4).

Engaging youth in the breadth and depth of design activities exposes youth to many different potential career opportunities as well as more general twenty-first-century skills. The Tacoma Clubhouse coordinator remarks, "I think kids will remain engaged as long as everybody continues to make it clear that learning anything takes time. If you do anything over and over again you become a master of it." This type of pedagogical approach is key to the long-term success of Clubhouse youth. Jeff Arthur, one of the Network staff, told us the story of one member with a goal:

> You never know what a member is going to cling onto and then that's
> going to be their thing. I was asking one of the members heading to col-
> lege about what she was going to do there and she replied, "Yes, I'm
> going to be a broadcast journalist." I asked, "OK, how did you find out
> about that?" She said, "I went to the Teen Summit 2 years ago. At the
> Teen Summit I was in a track where we went around and interviewed
> people. Ever since then I knew that that's what I wanted to do for the rest
> of my life."

THE CLUBHOUSE ROLE IN THE LOCAL COMMUNITY

At the local level, whether in Brooklyn, Johannesburg, or Dublin, Clubhouses have become known to their communities as a refuge and resource for youth. Clubhouse staff is well aware of what their members face every day, both in their schools and in their communities. As Luversa Sullivan observed, "we have a real transient community. A lot of our youth are homeless or their parents are homeless. Some come here from Child Protective Services. But most do things that are meaningful and end up doing something that helps them change their lives."

A community-based organizer for one of the Chicago Clubhouses, Almetris Stanley, described how some of her members "run the gauntlet" just to get to the Clubhouse:

> [A member] created a video about his [everyday] trip to the Clubhouse
> and what he has to endure to make it to our front door. And he only lives
> three blocks away. So he has to pass by the drug dealers. They're stand-
> ing on the corner. Then he is encouraged by the girls pulling on him.
> They want to take him in another direction. Then he is encountered by
> some guys shooting dice. But he passes by all of those distractions to get
> to [our] front door. Once he makes it to the door, he's in a safe haven.

The Clubhouse is a vital part of empowering kids to be productive members of their communities. For example, Clubhouse members in South Africa have created songs about the struggles that they face now in the townships, many addressing

the AIDS epidemic. Other Clubhouse members in Johannesburg and Newtown put their Photoshop skills to use in their community by volunteering to design new menus for a local restaurant. Jeff Arthur recalls, "They approached the owner of the restaurant with creating a menu for them with the Photoshop software that they used in the Clubhouse. He ended up using it in the restaurant."

Several Clubhouse coordinators have expressed that Clubhouses provide opportunities for youth from communities that often lack other productive outlets. Suha Al Syouf, Amman Clubhouse coordinator, described what her community would look like without a Clubhouse:

> Without the Clubhouse, my neighborhood would be full of young teenagers playing in the streets, careless about all the danger, most of the time doing nothing useful for their future. I might see gangs and fights more frequently. Maybe more students dropping out of school. There are some places they can go out to, like a public library and a garden, but it wouldn't provide them with the technology and activities that the Clubhouse provides. The learning model at the Clubhouse can't be seen anywhere else. Youth would be technology illiterate, as their families can't get them computers at home and, if they could, they'd only use it for games. They wouldn't be able to use the software to express themselves and enhance their creative thinking.

Clubhouse adults and members identify and help solve community problems by leveraging the technology skills honed at the Clubhouse. Clubhouse involvement has helped youth at the Tacoma Clubhouse, 70% of whom are homeless, to aspire to higher education. Sullivan proudly says of her members, "I would say 40–45% of our youth go on to college. The other ones get jobs." Similar results are reported across the Clubhouse Network. Almetris Stanley of Chicago shared how her members were learning to start their own company:

> We have a different type of mind-set, I think, because we are really proentrepreneurship. We realized early on that we need a business to help support the not-for-profit part of what we do. So we have started a few businesses and they are still developing. We have a T-shirt business. We had a person to donate everything that we could possibly need for the silk screening and the press. We're trying to get the members to run and use the technology and the space to help not just generate revenue for us but for them. Many members would like to work and they can't find jobs or they're so busy with their schoolwork that they can't work the hours that the job would require. So we're trying to promote a mindset that not only can you work for a company but you can own the company and set your own hours and still go to college.

In some communities, Clubhouse activities contribute to community efforts to bring disparate parties together and improve the quality of life for youth who must straddle those communities. For example, the Belfast Clubhouse currently

exists as two separate physical sites on opposite sides of the Shankill/West Belfast peace line. Decades of war and violence have divided the country. The coordinator, Louise Feeney, shared how members in these two Clubhouse sites worked toward unifying their community:

> Clubhouse members from both communities interact via the Clubhouse Village and Webcam linkups. This is an important first step to breaking barriers and building peace. One multimember project involves collaboration between both Clubhouse sites, and in the process increases both virtual and physical contact between these communities. The Clubhouse is working to increase understanding and to promote reconciliation.

Whatever the local community, the expectation for Clubhouse youth to take responsibility for their projects, their connections, and their community seems to be commonly valued. Coordinator Suha Al Syouf summed it up best with her remark:

> Personally, I feel I'm home if I go anywhere in the world where there is a Clubhouse. We all share the same environment and have the freedom to follow our interest and learn by design. We all speak one language of technology and creativity, no matter what color, name, identity, or religion we are. We all live in one Clubhouse Village, linking us together to share our ideas, projects, and each other.

THE GLOBAL CLUBHOUSE COMMUNITY

The Clubhouse supports members connecting with peers from around the world through its Village Network intranet (see Chapter 9). A coordinator noted, "If you can't travel there by plane, or train, or boat, you can do it on the Village and still be in your Clubhouse community." The Village supports the spread of project ideas and ways to support youth development at the Clubhouses. For example, ideas from South Africa can spread to not only other Clubhouses in the region, but to Clubhouses around the world. Those ideas contribute to improving the work that goes on in the Clubhouses and fostering community. Staffers have noted that the Clubhouse Network is an international organization that manages to be very tight-knit despite thousands of miles between Clubhouses. As Lynn Murray remarked about the Computer Clubhouse Annual Conference, "There's such a kinship among people from across the Network. People are from far-flung areas of the world, together in one room, and quickly become old friends. I think it's the shared value system, the commitment to the mission, and the unwavering agreement among everyone that this is our work that we are committed to doing, and I think it's the tie that binds."

However, making that vision become a reality involved some distinct challenges in maintaining and scaling the original Computer Clubhouse vision. When the Clubhouse Network first started, most of the Computer Clubhouses were

based in the United States. Consequently, the network's mentoring resources and materials were focused on needing mentors and defining their role in the Clubhouse model. As Karen Ellis of the Network staff recalls, "It wasn't on our minds to question how is mentoring going to transfer in Ireland, in Brazil, and in South Africa, because at the time, we did not have Clubhouses there."

As the Clubhouse Network grew, the idea around mentoring (or *volunteerism*, as it's now often called) has changed from country to country. In some countries, the word *mentor* just doesn't exist and the ways in which you locate mentors certainly differ as well. To recruit mentors in Boston, you go to a library and put up a volunteer flyer. That makes a lot of sense in Boston but does it make sense in Taipei? Does it make sense in the Clubhouse in Colombia? This presents distinct challenges for Network staff as they craft network-wide resources. In order to make the model successful in other cultures, Network staff turned to Clubhouses to see how they had adopted the mentoring model in order to provide a richer array of options and resources to other Clubhouses. One such solution came in the form of peer mentors or alumni mentors. Ellis recalls, "We looked at Clubhouses in Colombia and in Ireland. In these locations, a lot of their alumni are the mentors. They're actively pursuing that next stage of their role in the Clubhouse: member, then mentor. We weren't seeing that in the United States." This type of challenge cannot always be anticipated during initial conceptualization, but is key to the success of the model as it scales across continents and cultures.

Despite the challenges of being an international network, there are several distinct benefits as well. One of the things most commonly cited by coordinators and Network staff was the access to a worldwide network of like-minded individuals with an array of different talents. Network staff member Brenda Abanavas expressed it this way:
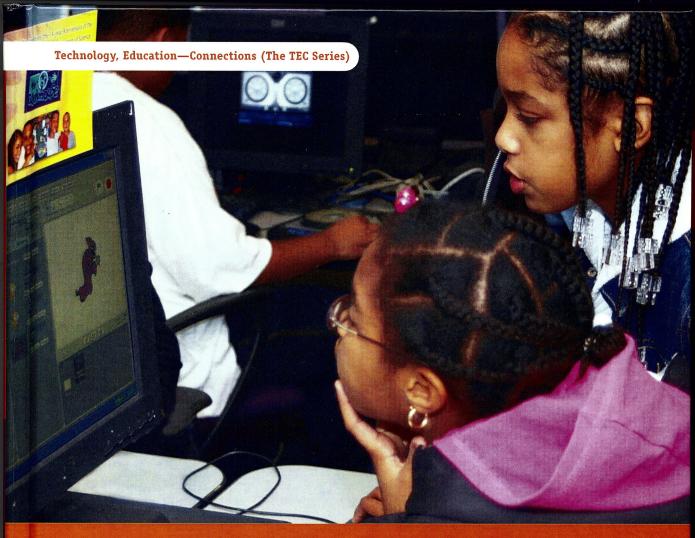
> For me, one of the best things about the Computer Clubhouse Network is the scope of the abilities of the people who are involved. I've never seen the accumulation of such talent in any one place. There are musicians, graphic designers, 3-D designers, IT people, and animators, for example. If you go to the Village and you look at our topic page and you see all the different areas in which someone has an interest in learning some form of technology, there is a whole network of people out there who are highly skilled at those areas.

But Lynn Murray noted that it is not just the resources, it is the culture of sharing:

> The resources and skills across the network—they're so deep and rich. There are so many people in the network with a variety of skill-sets and knowledge, so we are our own resource. And the sharing that's encouraged through the Village—just the exchange of skills and knowledge and support to one another. If you need something, you have all these people, not just the network staff.

CONCLUSION

The Computer Clubhouse model owes its uniqueness to the integration of informal learning and youth development opportunities via creative uses of technology. Youth can develop their projects and make the most of their access to peers, Clubhouse coordinators, mentors, community organizers, and the network—all playing a vital role in making a Computer Clubhouse more than just a computer lab. Upon becoming members, youth are expected to take responsibility for their project activities and roles in the community. They have ownership of a learning environment where they are trusted and respected. This casts the Clubhouse as a youth empowerment program in addition to a technology program and makes the Clubhouse a unique forum for youth to practice learning, creativity, and citizenship by leveraging technologies and learning relationships.

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THE COMPUTER CLUBHOUSE

CONSTRUCTIONISM AND CREATIVITY IN YOUTH COMMUNITIES

Forewords by BARTON J. HIRSCH AND ROSALIND HUDNELL

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PART III: COLLABORATIONS IN THE CLUBHOUSE COMMUNITY

PART IV: SHOWCASES OF COMPUTER CLUBHOUSE SUCCESSES

This book is about the Computer Clubhouse—the idea and the place—that inspires youth to think about themselves as competent, creative, and critical learners. So much of the social life of young people has moved online and participation in the digital public has become an essential part of youth identities. The Computer Clubhouse makes an important contribution not just in local urban communities but also as a model for after-school learning environments globally. This model has been uniquely successful scaling up, with over 100 clubhouses thriving worldwide. Showcasing research by scholars and evaluators that have documented and analyzed the international Computer Clubhouse Network, this volume considers the implications of their findings in the context of what it means to prepare youth to meet the goals of the 21st century.

Book Features:

- A successful, scalable model for providing at-risk youth a rich array of media design and computing experiences.
- Diverse examples of media created in the Clubhouse, ranging from digital stories, video games, interface designs, and digital art projects.
- Color photos of life in the Clubhouse, including youth projects.
- Interviews with stakeholders in the Clubhouse Network, from the director to coordinators at various international clubhouses.

"It is difficult to conceive of an after-school setting that would have a greater emphasis on positive youth development.... Beyond learning computer programming, young people at the Clubhouses learn marketable skills in product design, project management, teamwork, marketing, and communication.... Read [these chapters], appreciate what has already been accomplished, and consider the exciting possibilities for the future."
—From the Foreword by **Barton J. Hirsch**, Northwestern University, author of *A Place to Call Home: After-School Programs for Urban Youth*

"As you will read in this book, the impact of the Computer Clubhouse on underserved youth around the world has been far-reaching, long-lasting, and life-changing."
—From the Foreword by **Rosalind Hudnell**, Intel Corporation

"Essential reading for anyone concerned with the development and education of contemporary youth.... Its lessons go far beyond the Clubhouse."
—**Michael Cole**, author of *The Fifth Dimension: An After-School Program Built on Diversity*

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Cover photo by Jae Chung at the Flagship Clubhouse at the Museum of Science, Boston, which is also the global headquarters for the Intel Computer Clubhouse Network.