

The Community Development Process of RoseNet

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Abstract

RoseNet is an example of community collaboration between the University of Alberta and immigrant serving agencies to contribute to the learning of legal issues by both the abused immigrant women and those they consulted. Understanding the barriers for accessing legal information and services, the project team embarked on a journey with grass roots immigrant organizations to design a virtual safe place for immigrant women to acquire legal knowledge relevant to spousal abuse in Alberta. Using an adult education community development model and through focus group meetings, RoseNet is being developed as a non-formal, community based learning web site. The project team believes that the development of legal literacy and computer skills for the agencies and the abused immigrant women contributes to their lifelong learning skills.

Introduction

It is very difficult to determine exactly how prevalent spousal abuse is in Canada. Estimates indicate however, that anywhere from one in eight (12 per cent), to as many as 60 per cent of women who are part of a couple, encounter some form of violence from their male partners (Harris and Dewdney, 1994). Results from a 1999 General Social Survey of Victimization indicated that 7% of people who were married or living in a common-law relationship experienced some form of violence by a partner during the previous 5 years. It further stated that women are three times more likely to be injured by spousal violence than men and to be recipients of violence abuse. (Statistics Canada, 2000) Similarly, the scope of spousal abuse in immigrant communities is difficult to assess. Many factors, including the fear of being ostracized by their own community, and the fear of deportation, stop immigrant women from reporting incidents of abuse (Sy and Choldin, 1994).

The Internet (Web) can be a very powerful tool offering a means of addressing unmet information needs. According to the A.C.Nielsen Canada Internet Fact Book, (www.acnielsen.ca/sect_fastfacts/index_ff_inter.htm), in 1999 there were approximately 14 million (49%) Canadians aged 12 and over using the Internet. Knowing that Internet usage will continue to increase and that information seekers and learner can be anonymous on the Net, the project team became interested in developing learning materials for spousal abuse. RoseNet grew from the findings of a research conducted for VIOLET (www.violetnet.org), a learning web site for mainstream abused women and their service providers. As the researchers discussed the legal information needs for spousal abuse recipients in shelters, it became apparent that immigrant women have special needs in spousal abuse situations. With this impetus, RoseNet began to take shape with the Legal Studies Program at the University of Alberta and Changing Together: A Centre for Immigrant Women as the key community collaborator.

The project team articulated three major goals for RoseNet:

- To contribute to the process of equitable participation in the legal system by immigrant women
- To contribute to the mainstream society's understanding of legal issues on partner abuse in the context of immigrant women
- To contribute to the process of equitable participation by immigrant women in the use of the Web

Prior to the design and development of the site, there were six focus groups meetings in two urban centres with representatives from the immigrant community. The purpose of the focus groups was to introduce the immigrant women to the Web and to solicit information concerning how relevant legal information should be organized and presented. The name RoseNet was chosen by a group of six female cultural brokers representing different ethnic backgrounds. These cultural brokers connect immigrant women to the mainstream services. In a conscious effort to minimize the risk faced by abused women when discussing abuse, the site was to be named after a flower. RoseNet was chosen as the site name as Rose represented a universally and easily recognizable object. The project staff not only needed validation of the site information but also saw this as an opportunity to assist the community in learning about the Web. As the cultural leaders gave us their insights into the needs of abused women, the project staff was able to share our technological resources for their future use and development.

RoseNet is both a project and a web site. As a web site, RoseNet provides learning opportunities about the law to the immigrant community. A web site with information organized under two different approaches can be a handy ready-reference for both an abused woman and those she consults. It offers a context relevant learning opportunity 24 hours a day 7 days a week for those who have access to the Internet. As a project, RoseNet facilitates the development of both personal and collective knowledge on the existing legislation to assist abused women in making their decisions. It is the hope of the project staff that by providing women with information about legal alternatives, the women would be encouraged to get involved in the future to effect legislative changes. RoseNet is also a project that develops the immigrant women's community's capacity in using the Internet. Through training and involvement in the design and useability testing process, the women will acquire Internet related skills.

Abused Immigrant Women

The term "immigrant women" is used both to describe social status and legal status. In the everyday usage of the term, immigrant women include newcomers, refugees and those who have been in Canada for many years. This is more in keeping with Wiebe's (1985) definition rather than that of the Canadian government. It is important to note that this definition does include women who can speak English or French.

One of the first in-depth research project, "Like a Wingless Bird...", MacLeod et al (1993) interviewed sixty-four women from four different minority language groups in four urban areas in Canada. Through this study the women shared their challenges and

pain as they experienced abuse in a foreign land where they did not speak one of the official languages.

Sy and Choldin (1994) interviewed seventeen workers from eleven immigrant serving agencies covering two major urban centres and two smaller centres in Alberta. Through the workers' experience and their stories, the study describes some recurring themes including isolation caused by language and cultural barriers, distrust of political and legal institutions, discrimination/racism, fear of being ostracized by their ethnic community, bringing shame to the family and fear of deportation. It should be noted that abused immigrant women generally do not directly disclose incident of abuse. Disclosure usually comes after a trusting relationship has been developed.

Miedema and Wachholz (1998), through a series of focus group meetings with abused immigrant women in New Brunswick, identified and grouped the barriers to the justice system into five key areas:

- Patriarchal family structures
- Women as keeper of the family
- The structural oppression experienced by immigrant women
- Legal and justice information needs
- Immigrant women and the police and
- Other issues which could not be categorized (Miedema and Wachholz, 1998)

Generally speaking the “average” woman feels confused and intimidated by the legal system. (Rafiq, 1991) This is even worse for immigrant woman who come from a different cultural and legal system. Interviews also showed that immigrant women believe that the Canadian legal system is based on a culture whose values is not consistent with their own value. The challenge for RoseNet is to create a learning context that acknowledges and respects the differences amongst immigrant women while enabling the women to learn about Canadian laws that pertain to their situation.

Information Seekers and Communication Systems

Spousal abuse is widespread, crosses all socio-economic classes and cultures, and has lasting and sometimes debilitating effects on women and their families. These abused women ended up feeling isolated and vulnerable. (MacLeod, 1987). Abused women may at some point in the relationship, seek assistance and information that will help them to change the patterns of abuse. In this way, abused women are no different than other adult learners who seek information to develop knowledge that will assist them in understanding their situation or seeking options. “Information is data that has value in a context” (Clarke, 1999) and the information must be relevant to women at the particular time they are seeking assistance. “Knowledge is the matrix of impressions within which an individual situates newly acquired information” (ibid). RoseNet presents the legal information using two different approaches.

- *Rose's Story* presents a learning opportunity in a story format that enables readers to identify with Rose and learn the related legal issues as the story unfolds.

- *The Facts* provides those who have a basic understanding of the law, with specific legal information upon which they can assimilate the information into their existing knowledge.

When adults seek information, no matter the reason, they initially look at their personal experiences. They may look for information and support from people who are like themselves, beginning with family and friends. They are most likely to make inquiries from friends or leaders in their community whom they can trust (Sy and Choldin, 1994). RoseNet is currently designed for use by the service providers and leaders who has Internet access and adequate English language skills.

Abused Women and Learning

Adults approach learning with their own reservoir of skills and experiences and use this history to engage with the information, make new inferences, and establish new levels of understanding. Drawing from this reservoir also demands energy and reflection in order for the learning to assist with changes in self-concept (MacKeracher, 1997). If one's energy is being drained by other more traumatic events, then a beneficial learning environment may be more difficult to establish. Adult learners tend to require the information quickly and completely in order to continue with their lives. Immigrant women may be under extreme stress and this will affect their ability to learn while using a computer. The hormonal reaction effected by physiological stress is defined in negative terms: "the emotions...are felt as fear, anxiety, anger and pain leading eventually to a state of distress" (MacKeracher, 1997). Abused women may also be considered silent knowers as described by Belenky (1986). As silent knowers, the women have little confidence in their own abilities to make decisions and to have faith in their own knowledge. They "feel passive, reactive and dependent, they see authorities as being all-powerful, if not overpowering" (Belenky, 1986). The environment must then be inviting and be viewed as a safe place to learn. It must honor and support their silence until they "find" their voice again (Horsman, 1999). So as not to discourage the learner, the learning situation should not be threatening. Since there is a sense of disorientation when attempting to acquire any new skill and knowledge, the learner may stop the process entirely if the learning situation is threatening. Any withdrawal on the part of the learner may prove detrimental, especially when attempting to understand legal information.

Women and Technology

To use technology as a learning tool for abused women, one must be cognizant of the relationship between women and technology. Women organize and construct knowledge and understanding differently. It would follow that there would also be differences in the ways women interact with technology and computers for the construction of knowledge. Little is known about how women from diverse cultures learn and how they learn on the Web. Knowing that the Web does not have geographical boundaries, the project team reviewed research on distance education, more specifically as it relates to gender issues in western societies. Burge (in Gibson, 1998) addresses gender issues in distance education and attempts to incorporate not only the learning styles of women, but also the impact of

the use of technology. Her key observations including building constructivist sites, acknowledging diversity, being women friendly and examining access and equity to ensure inclusivity were significant for the design of the RoseNet web site.

Community Development and the Web Design Process

The RoseNet project was guided by the community, its needs and facilities. At the onset of the project, the project team realized the complexities of designing a learning web site for this specialized group of women. They made a decision that the site will only be in English. A multi-lingual site should be considered after this site is completed and when resources are available. Using an adaptation of an adult education community development model, Dean and Dowling(1987), we integrated approaches into an open model that is dynamic, constantly changing, tentative, humanistic and highlights skills exchange. With this model (Figure 1), the project staff started on a path of developing a community of lifelong learners using both face-to-face and online approaches while acknowledging the fact that our approach was iterative, group-oriented and not linear. Within the project, we encompassed elements of participatory action that assisted in actualizing the web site and fostering its psychic and real ownership of the process. The project staff concurred with London (1960), as stated in Hamilton (1992), that “when both learners and educator co-operate in planning and program operation, educational needs have a greater likelihood of being fulfilled”. We worked with the community at two levels: an advisory committee consisting of key representative from the immigrant community and the community at large and; the representatives from the immigrant community that participated during the design process. Using VIOLET, the web site for mainstream abused women, the project staff introduced and assisted the representatives in learning how to use the Web. This process provided the representatives with a base from which to draw their analysis of the first drafts of Rose’s Story. Through out the process, the project staff was cognizant of the fact that this is an educational process aimed at empowering the immigrant women involved. Mutual learning took place in all meetings. Through observation and discussions, the project staff was able to assess the learning needs of the immigrant women using technology in a non-formal learning environment.

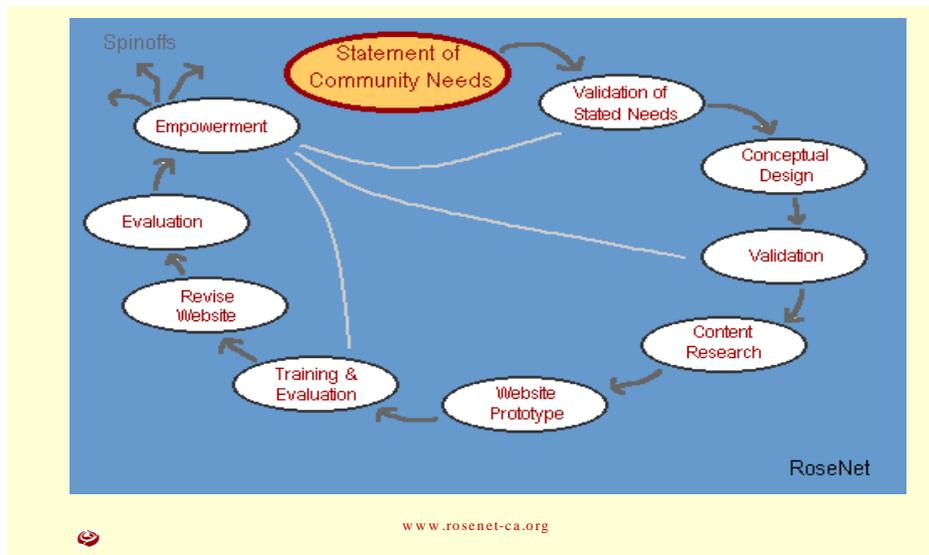


Figure 1

Research Methodology

The first version of the RoseNet learning site is being used to conduct qualitative research into two areas:

- how immigrant women learn using the Web ;
- to assess RoseNet's content validity and utility.

Focus groups are the method by which the project staff gather insights, comments and needs. It was anticipated that there may be some individual sessions as well.

The project staff has completed three focus group meetings. Each session, approximately two hours in length, involved discussions about non-formal learning and individual review of the web site. Semi-structured group discussion followed each session. All sessions were audiotaped. Additional focus groups meetings are being scheduled in other urban and mid-sized centres.

Preliminary Findings

- The project assisted the community in realizing the potential of the technology. One key organization is now planning an Internet training lab for its clients.
- There have been discussions on developing other learning web sites for immigrant women.
- To date, focus group participants appeared to share a preference for narrative style of learning namely, Rose's Story
- Our concerns about barriers, language, access and fear of reprisal from their families and their communities have been validated. The placement of strategic assistance is crucial for access to timely information in a secure and anonymous place.
- There is a need to have some learning materials in different languages to reach the

non-English speakers. However, there remains the question of whether or not the Web is a viable learning medium for non-English speakers.

The project team has a vision of learning in the 21st century by effective use of the Internet. This type of learning tool is valuable and important and can assist women today and in the future. "...The Web, in addition to being an information tool, is also a place for discussion, exchange and activism"(Joseph, 1999, p.52). Our research in this area plays an important role in adding to the body of knowledge about designing with the technology, special learners, and their needs in using the technology to learn.

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