



**Department Psychology and Speech Pathology**

**Community and Organisational Psychology Research Group**

Proposal for Evaluation of the *Information and Experience Exchange Project*, Standing Conference for Community Development

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# **Proposal for Evaluation: *Information and Experience Exchange Project*, Standing Conference for Community Development**

## ***Introduction***

The Standing Conference for Community Development (SCCD) is seeking evaluation of the *Information and Experience Exchange Project* which has been in operation since 2001. The objectives of the project were to:

1. Provide a facility to enable community development practitioners (paid and unpaid) to exchange information and experience;
2. Provide a community development practitioners and policy makers with examples and learning from practice that has worked;
3. Provide information and an opportunity for dialogue about, policy that has implications for community development;
4. Provide community development practitioners and policy makers with an up to date source of information about events, publications and research related to community development.

The way of achieving those objectives was primarily through the development of the use of the SCCD web site.

The central question to be asked in evaluation is:

**How can SCCD, as an organisation with a very diverse membership, encourage and support the exchange of information and experience, primarily through the use of a web site, in order to contribute to practice development?**

This question requires an evaluation strategy that is both formative (providing information for project improvement during the course of the project) and summative (providing information that demonstrates ways in which the project has contributed to practice development). This proposal is for a community psychological<sup>2</sup> evaluation of the project, one that is context-sensitive and emphasises user experiences in order to inform the development of the project and assess its impact on practitioner development.

## ***Background***

The use of internet and web site resources has increased rapidly in recent years, with access and availability to community and voluntary groups patchy, and usage low although increasing (NCVO, 1997).

There have been some evaluations of web sites, largely in terms of their physical structures, technical processes and the quality (in terms of authenticity and validity) of

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<sup>2</sup> A community psychological perspective is one that seeks to promote and understand social change in terms of people's experiences embedded in a particular social context. It shares, with community development, an explicit value base and principled practice (SCCD, 2001; Kagan and Burton, 2001; Prilleltensky, 2001).

information (e.g. Alexander and Tate, 1999; Smith, 1997). Whilst file statistics of web site hits are readily available, they give a misleading measure of web performance, and relatively little is known about how web sites are used in the *real* environment, from the perspectives of their users (Menou, 2002; Taylor, 2001) and in terms of impact on professional practice (Menou, 1998; 2002). In the development field, McConnell (2000) draws attention to fact that some NGOs are connected to the internet, whilst their and their stakeholders - and other NGOs - may not be. He argues, that there is a connection between 'knowledge gatekeepers' (web managers and internet 'champions'), availability of technology and web usage: McConnell (2000: 10) suggests that it is the presence of an internet champion

" who combines technological experience with an appreciation of what the technology can bring to an organisation and its stakeholders [that] can do more for information and knowledge sharing than any computer ever will".

Thus any evaluation of web-based information and practice development must consider the capability of those practitioners and organisations who access (or not) the information.

Web site evaluations, then, should combine user experience, site content and usability with organisational concerns (Lanfranco, 1997), and this is in keeping with the systems perspectives of community psychology. In addition, there is a push for a range of research methods to be employed in such evaluations (Taylor, 2001; Anderson et al. 2001). This, too is in keeping with the methodological pluralism promoted by community psychology. The range of methods found to be useful, include those that are, themselves, on-line, such as web site Guest books, user surveys and on-line questionnaires. Chat rooms and discussion groups, also offer possibilities for both making and strengthening connections between people and providing data about the use to which the web site is being put. These methods, however, present particular challenges for researchers in terms of the authenticity and validity of data collected (Sixsmith and Murray (2001), and are, of course, restricted to site users and respondents who are internet connected. For the proposed evaluation, it is as important to know how those who are unconnected gain information and develop their knowledge and practice as those who are connected, as this may raise important issues for both the development of internet usage and the support that SCCD is able to give to the community development field.

One of the intentions of the SCCD web site is to support practitioner networking. The types of connections people form through internet interaction, differ from those in face to face interaction in particular (Gordo-Lopez and Parker, 1999), and sometimes counter-intuitive ways (Kraut et al., 1998; Locke, 1998). Furthermore, relationships may develop beyond the original networking intention (Silverman, 2001), and be fractured along dimensions of race, class and gender (Ebo, 1998). Thus an evaluation of the web site should include an interpersonal dimension, in order to assess its impact on the development of social capital amongst practitioners.

In the light of the above, an evaluation of a web site-based project would need to take account of context, mechanisms of engagement with the site, and outcomes at three different levels - environmental, interpersonal and personal (see Table 1). Context and outcomes should include consideration of personal, interpersonal and environmental issues; engagement with the site should include access and availability, authority and

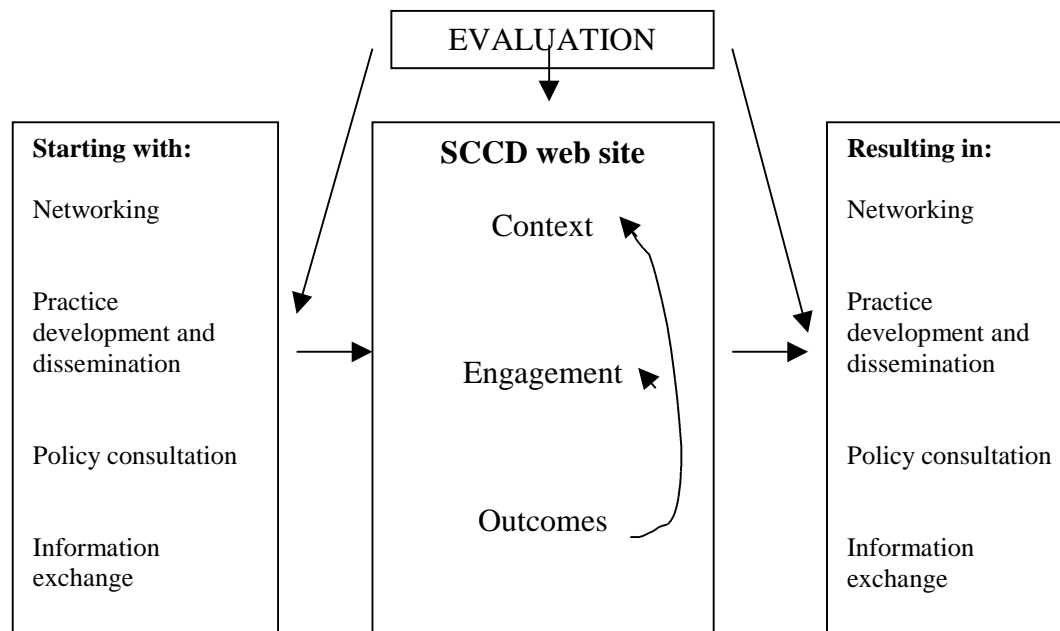
clarity of purpose, interactivity and navigability, content, relevance and timeliness (Taylor, 2001).

**Table 1: Components of web site evaluation**

<b>Context</b>	<b>Engagement with site</b>	<b>Positive and negative outcomes</b>
<p><b><i>Environmental:</i></b> Availability of other websites; access to internet technology;</p> <p><b><i>Organisational</i></b> Existing forms of communication with members and dissemination of good practice; internal SCCD systems;</p> <p><b><i>Interpersonal:</i></b> Existing means of networking, dissemination of good practice and feedback on policy consultations</p> <p><b><i>Personal</i></b> Existing level of internet skill; knowledge for practice development</p>	<p><b><i>Environmental:</i></b> Access; Architecture of the site: appearance, navigability, readability of the site;</p> <p><b><i>Organisational</i></b> Skills and resources to establish and maintain website; attitudes and receptivity of SCCD staff; links with strategic plans and strategies</p> <p><b><i>Interpersonal:</i></b> Clarity of purpose; interactivity of site; relevance and quality of material; linkage possibilities</p> <p><b><i>Personal:</i></b> Usability of the site; authority timeliness of information;</p>	<p><b><i>Environmental:</i></b> Changes in access, availability and usability; relative value of other sites;</p> <p><b><i>Organisational</i></b> Impact on workings of SCCD; efficeincy savings vs. development of activities; membership and member satisfaction; knowledge and information gains</p> <p><b><i>Interpersonal:</i></b> Changes in networking; relative value of other forms networking; positive and negative impact on organisations; positive and negative impact on social capital</p> <p><b><i>Personal:</i></b> Identification of need for internet skills development; changes in practice; relative</p>

The SCCD project has been introduced into a professional environment in which community development practitioners already have methods of networking, disseminating good practice, consult on policy and exchange information. Thus the task of an evaluation would be in part to explore practitioners' perceptions of the efficacy of these existing mechanisms, alongside the impact of the new project and web site. Figure 1 illustrates the range of understanding sought by such an evaluation.

**Figure 1: Range of Understanding sought by evaluation of SCCD Project**



Thus an evaluation should provide information on the context, web site engagement and outcomes, taking account of existing practices and user perceptions of the positive and negative impact of the project on these practices.

In the light of the above discussion, this proposal is for a multi-method, user focused, context sensitive evaluation of the impact of the SCCD project on community development practice.

### ***Aims and Objectives of Evaluation***

- A. To provide independent information to the SCCD about the effectiveness and impact of the project in relation to its objectives;
- B. To provide information from the perspectives of community development practitioners about the effectiveness of the web site and other sources of influence on practice development;
- C. To identify, where relevant, recommendations for improvements to the web site and priorities for the future development of the project.
- D. To illustrate ways in which the project has enhanced the work of SCCD as an organisation;

Specifically the aims are to:

1. Collate and analyse data, at personal, interpersonal and environmental levels, from a range of different community development practitioners, about sources of influence on practice development and the relative contribution made by the SCCD project;

2. Describe how the SCCD project has contributed to change in community development practice, knowledge, professional networking and links between practitioners, as well as in how SCCD as an organisation works;
3. Assess the impact of the SCCD project on community development practitioners beyond the SCCD membership;
4. Provide feedback to SCCD ideas for improvement to the web site in the light of user feedback, and needs to develop internet capability amongst the SCCD membership;
5. Identify some future developments SCCD might make in order to contribute to community development practice.

### **Design**

A multi-method, user evaluation of the impact of the SCCD project is proposed. Methods will include face to face interviews with the webmaster; site usability tests, on-line feedback and survey, postal survey, and telephone interviews. Table 2 summarises the information sought with method of data collection and anticipated evaluation outputs. In order to assess change as a result of web site development, interviews and surveys will be conducted at the start of the project and 12 months later.

**Figure 2: Evaluation design:**

<b>Information sought about:</b>	<b>Method of obtaining information:</b>	<b>Information used to develop and inform:</b>
Engagement	1. Web master interviews	Intentions and objectives of web site; capacity for web site development (aim 4)
Engagement	2. Usability tests	How easy the web site is to use in relation to objectives (aims 1,3,4)
Engagement Outcome	3. Online information: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• e.g. guest book/discussion group</li> <li>• user survey</li> <li>• SCCD members</li> <li>• non-members</li> </ul>	Positive and negative experiences of users in terms of web site design; cumulative record of reactions to web site; changes in user experiences over time; impact on professional development (aims 2,3,4)
Context Engagement Outcome	4. Postal survey <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SCCD members</li> <li>• Other community development networks</li> </ul>	Member and non member experiences; perceived impact of site in terms of information, networking, impact on practice; extent to which web site builds on or replaces existing practices; alternative influences on practice development (aims 1,2,3,4)
Context Engagement Outcome	5. Telephone interviews <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Web site users</li> <li>• Non web site users</li> <li>• Users who did not return a questionnaire</li> </ul>	User and non user perspectives: detailed information on alternative sources of impact on practice development; availability and access; skills; impact on work and practice;

		gains or losses of social capital; dissenting views - the 'downside' of internet based information. (aims 1,2,3,4,5)
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In keeping with a community psychological and community development approach, a number of considerations influence how the design will be implemented. These include:

- *Participation*: questions to ask will be developed in part from discussions with SCCD personnel and recommendations for change will be negotiated;
- *Empowerment*: the identification of internet use and practice development needs, as well as the development of skills and capacity through engagement with the site, reflect issues of empowerment
- *Diversity*: attempts will be made in sampling for interviews, to seek a broad range of opinions along different social dimensions, such as age, gender, ethnicity, experience of internet use, sector of involvement, category of SCCD membership, previous training and education;
- *'Conscientisation'* or the development of understanding: provision of a guest book and the posting of findings on the web site may contribute to the further enhancing of insight and understanding of those accessing the site.

### ***Participants***

Different people will participate in the different stages of data collection.

**Table 3: Number of participants by stage of data collection**

<b>Stage of data collection</b>	<b>Participants</b>	<b>Number</b>
1. Web master interviews	Web master at SCCD	1
2. Usability tests	Researcher(s)	1 or 2
3. Online information:	Site Users <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• SCCD members*</li> <li>• Non SCCD members</li> </ul>	Unknown - depends on usage
4. Postal survey	SCCD members	300
	Other community development networks	e.g. Local network 50
5. Telephone interviews	Web site users	Sample of those SCCD members replying above: 40 (see separate table below)
	Non web site users	20

*\* currently the interactive components of the website are for members only: this may change. If not, issues of access to this part of the site by the researchers will have to be negotiated*

For the telephone interviews a coverage sample of SCCD members who use web sites will be selected as illustrated in Table 4.

Table 4: Sampling frame for telephone interviews

	<b>Sector:</b> Community Voluntary Public Private
<b>Category of Membership SCCD:</b> Individual Organisational Network Non-member Non- Q'rre returner	<i>Dimensions of diversity included</i>

### **Timescales**

The precise timescale of the project will be negotiated with SCCD. However, it is likely that there will be two major points of data collection, Summer 2002 and summer 2003. Table 5 charts timescale onto stage of data collection.

Table 5: Timescale of the project

<b>Stage of data collection</b>	<b>Timescale</b>	<b>Timetable</b>
1. Web master interviews	3 x 1 hour	June 2002; December 2002; June 2003
2. Usability tests	2 x 6 hours	July 2002- June 2003
3. Online information:	on-going data collection  Data analysis	From August 2002 December 2002; July 2003
4. Postal survey	Questionnaire design and data collection  Data analysis (N=450)	June-July 2002 July 2002 July 2003  December 2002 July 2003
5. Telephone interviews	30 mins. per person, N= 30 plus 10 non-users Analysis	July 2002 July 2002 September 2002 August 2003



### **Ethical issues**

The project proposal will be submitted to the Department of Psychology and Speech Pathology's Ethical Panel, and the work will only proceed once ethical approval has been received. The Panel operates within the framework of the British Psychological Society's (1997) *Ethical Principles for Conducting Research with Human Participants* of the British Psychological Society (1997) and the *Statement of Ethical Practice* of the British Sociological Association (1993). Information about the evaluation will be posted on the web site and if a guest book and on-line survey are incorporated, information about how the information will be used (Guest book /discussion group) and who will have access to it (survey) will be included. Interviews and postal surveys will be accompanied by an information sheet and consent will be assumed on return of the questionnaire and agreement to the interview. As far as possible participants will remain anonymous. Where there is only one person to interview (as in the case of the web master) this will not be possible. However, use of the information provided will only be made with that person's agreement. Information about where complaints about the conduct of the research team will be made available with information about the project.

### **Dissemination**

An interim report will be made available after 6 months in addition to informal feedback about initial findings to SCCD. A final report will be made available 2 months after the last collection of data. These reports will be circulated to the SCCD, and posted on the SCCD and Community Psychology web sites. The information arising from the project will be jointly owned by the research team and the SCCD. The research team will be able to publish work from the research in examined theses and professional and academic journals. If appropriate, all work for publication will be anonymised, with the name and location of the project withheld so that individual participants will not be identified.

### **Budget**

The model is one where an existing research student (Asiya Siddiquee) who is undertaking a project on *Assessing the impact of the Internet and e-mail on community in terms of social capital through exploration of the health and voluntary sector* does the bulk of the data collection and analysis; project management, co-ordination and supervision, as well as project report writing is undertaken by Carolyn Kagan.

### **Proposer**

Carolyn Kagan, BSc., DPhil., DASS (CQSW), C.Couns Psy  
Professor of Community Social Psychology and Deputy Head of Department  
Psychology and Speech Pathology , Manchester Metropolitan University

### **Relevant Research Experience**

I have managed funded research projects since 1980 with funding from a number of bodies including Mental Health Foundation; Joseph Rowntree Foundation; Federation

Supported Living Groups; Department Health and Social Security; Health Action Zone.

I worked half-time from 1986-1996 as a member of the North West Training and Development Team, as research and social services member of this small consultancy team with a brief to work to enhance the lives of people with learning difficulties in the North West. I have considerable experience of service development and evaluation, in the public, private, voluntary and community sectors, using a variety of methods, and have written approximately 25 reports for internal agency use and a further 30 reports that are in the public domain about this work.

Most of my work is as a community psychologist, working with some of the most vulnerable people to help them get the most from social agencies and services, and to enrich their quality of life. I supervise students undertaking community psychology projects concerned with change in local communities. I manage the *Community* strand within the Community and Organisational Psychology Research Group in the Department. I am joint founding editor of the international journal *Community, Work and Family*. I currently supervise 6 research students and workers on projects concerned with community development, service development, learning disabled and mentally ill people. One of these students is working on a project *Assessing the impact of the Internet and e-mail on community in terms of social capital through exploration of the health and voluntary sector*, and it is anticipated that she would work closely with this project. I am currently a member of a local interdisciplinary Evaluation Partnership which has evolved from a project in which I and colleagues from University of Hull explored the development of evaluation capability across the different sectors with an interest in health, broadly defined (Midgley et al., 2001). I am a member of the International Association for Community Development (IACD).

More details about my work can be found on [www.compsy.org.uk](http://www.compsy.org.uk)

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