

Digitizing Alaska

A pilot project funded by the NTIA yields insights into using broadband to promote learning and earning.

By Frank Odasz / Lone Eagle Consulting

In spring 2013, with funding from the NTIA's State Broadband Initiative, Connect Alaska (www.connectak.org) launched a research project to learn directly from members of Alaska Native villages about their use of broadband and technology and to develop best practices for increasing technology use among local residents. As a specialist in rural, remote and indigenous Internet learning since 1997, Lone Eagle Consulting was asked to provide digital workshops for this project. The approach was to focus on listening and exploring the effectiveness of short, create-and-share, motivational "Web-raising" workshops. We found we could quickly create confidence by imparting fast-track skills, teaching all attendees how to create art e-commerce sites in less than an hour.

We also learned that even in remote villages, nearly everyone has a smartphone and that Facebook is the most effective means of sharing news and innovations and is a tool that can be used far more effectively in the near future. The recent, sudden popularity of mobile devices and social media sets the stage for enjoyable, social learning – mobile learning, which offers everyone an opportunity for sharing new, entry-level entrepreneurial opportunities.

For example, an Alaska Native youth posted photos of painted tennis shoes on Facebook and was inundated with orders even though he was not trying to create his own business. The same thing happened when another youth (who was trying to start a business) posted Native art on iPhone skins. Used wisely, social media can build local and regional socioeconomic capacity.

Communities must own the opportunity discovery process.

This initial success points the way for future workshops and demonstrates how communities can stimulate local cultures of creativity even without external funding, now that ARRA monies have been spent. Workshop attendees learned to create videos, e-books and other products, and they shared many of these innovations online with all 250-plus Alaska Native villages, in particular the village of Metlakatla, where the workshop was held. Clearly, the Alaska Native tradition of creative adaptation is alive and well.

Youth-driven, local innovation incubators could seed local digital-service businesses as young people demonstrate how they can help local citizens and businesses create a culture of use and a culture of digital creativity.

A LOCAL CULTURE OF COLLABORATION

The challenge is how quickly a community can create a culture of use, followed by a culture of collaboration, leading to a culture of creativity in which everyone understands the potential win-win of effective collaboration. If we all share what we know, we'll all have access to all our knowledge.

The innovation diffusion bell curve starts with early adopters, such as entrepreneurs and innovators, who represent 10 percent to 15 percent of the population. The remaining 85 percent – those without an interest in learning new things – will suffer a growing disadvantage.

Whose responsibility is it to instigate mass innovation, given the availability of broadband and of unlimited distance-learning tools and access?

It is everyone's responsibility.

PRINCIPLES FOR TEACHING INNOVATION

- 1 Proactively seek what's working for others, and study the innovations of others for inspiration.
- 2 Understand that anyone can copy working models or mash up key ideas to create something original.
- 3 Explore new business models that show a clear trend toward engaging consumers: using social media, crowdsourcing, sharing free resources and more.
- 4 Self-assess how well the community encourages and celebrates local innovators.

BEST PRACTICES FOR INDIVIDUALS

Decide to become a self-directed learner or lone eagle.

- 1 Keep an open mind and seek what's working for others like you. Learn from other innovators. The world is full of innovations from other lone eagles, and most are searchable online.
- 2 Find open-minded lone eagles willing to collaborate and participate in the exponential benefits of effective collaboration. Create a trusted mutual support network, and have fun with those who enjoy making good things happen.
- 3 Try new things whenever possible as a good habit to build your self-directed learning skills. Make this

Create a local culture of creativity.

your playtime rather than a work habit. Consider mistakes as valuable learning opportunities, and plan to make a lot of them.

- 4 Help others learn whenever possible, and you will learn a lot about yourself and how you can create services and businesses to accelerate learning in others.

BEST PRACTICES FOR COMMUNITIES: WE'RE BETTER TOGETHER

Solutions for broadband jobs tend to be individual entrepreneurship efforts, not community initiatives. The two come together if communities aggressively celebrate individual successes, identify the characteristics of success and share success stories. Streamlining the low-tech, Web-based startup process by identifying local support services is one obvious solution to minimize an individual's learning curve. In addition, because measurements define success, creating new metrics to reflect progress (or lack of it) of individuals and communities is fundamental to the way forward.

An example of a new metric for social innovation is identifying a neighborhood's GPA as the number of "Good People Acting," which can give people meaningful opportunities to be socially recognized. Hosting a local competition for short create-and-share workshops can motivate attendees by ensuring their success, creating value and providing a venue for sharing this new value in support of the public good.

- 1 One-hour Web-raising: Help all attendees create free e-commerce or personal websites as a meaningful way to quickly build self-confidence. Then show how to share links to their sites via a new community

e-commerce website. This creates new motivation by quickly building confidence in low-income, low-literacy attendees.

Smart local support services can easily minimize the learning curve. Not everyone has to know everything; rather, people can leverage local expertise for services such as e-marketing, graphic design and social media marketing.

As networks get faster and devices become smaller, easier to use and more powerful, integrated and interconnected, there is an opportunity to leverage mobile learning and mobile commerce to engage more potential entrepreneurs faster and at lower cost. This can produce large numbers of beginners' digital businesses among the very populations most in need.

- 2 Local, peer-maintained e-gov portals: Free Web tools make it easy for anyone to become a "video citizen professor." To create a show-and-tell peer video, all one has to do is to hit a button and narrate while moving through Web pages or an on-screen application. Hitting another button saves or posts the video in the cloud with a URL to conveniently share. This allows everyone an opportunity to contribute what they've learned to the community on a regular basis and create a vibrant local learning society.

Citizens could even create original videos showing the best online resources, from their local cultural perspectives, for public safety, health, education, entrepreneurship, energy and more.

- 3 Social media recognition of local mentors: By leveraging social media, families can share the best educational, health, family income and related apps on an ongoing basis. Parents and young students can learn apps that enable them to create online videos on an ongoing basis.

Everyone is both learner and teacher,
both consumer and producer, all the time.

Innovative applications can come only from citizens themselves.

Connecting parents and youth with local anchor institutions allows them to create a local e-gov portal of the best online resources and applications.

All community institutional stakeholders should identify best practices specific to their functions within the community. State agencies and associated local institutions can post online their pick of the best appropriate resources by sector for meeting local needs.

Easy startup local action plans include

- Holding community tech nights to showcase local talents. Regular events can show online what's happening locally and elsewhere regarding replicable innovations.
- Posting online videos of local and model entrepreneurs and e-commerce successes.
- Hosting frequent, local Web-raising events in which every participant will create a sustainable, free, e-commerce website in less than one hour.
- Creating a Web directory of all local businesses with a Web presence.
- Creating a mentor roster online to help match those with skills with

those eager to learn.

- Creating the means for ongoing sharing of local innovations among communities as a vibrant "community of communities."

NEW FREEDOMS, HARD CHOICES

As the former Congressional Office of Technology Assessment stated, "The diversity of innovative applications required to create a successful national information infrastructure can only come from the citizens themselves."

Amazing new freedoms are now available – unprecedented in human history – but real choices must be made to take advantage of the new opportunities. One has to be willing to embark on a personal learning adventure, starting by seeking what's already working for others. Learning to create and share collaboratively is an essential step to understanding that "We are better together."

As the Kansas City Playbook states, the city's economic success in leveraging gigabit access will depend on "90 percent sociology and 10 percent infrastructure."

Now that \$7 billion for infrastructure has been spent in the broadband stimulus program, all eyes are looking to see who can best innovate, and share their replicable successes, to inspire the rest of us.

As Internet pioneer Tom Grundner said in 1988, "It is just a matter of who and when." ❖

RESOURCES

Launching local innovation incubators

<http://lone-eagles.com/innovation-incubators.htm>

Resources for local communities to become intentionally innovative

Rural Telecommunications Congress Wiki

<http://innovativecommunities.pbworks.com>

Eleven broadband toolkits: BTOP, Kansas City Google Playbook and more

The Alaska Native tradition of creative adaptation

<http://vimeo.com/81742521>

The recommended eight-minute video overview

<http://lone-eagles.com/digitizing-metlakatla.htm>, Lone Eagle's Youtube

Channel <http://youtube.com/fodasz>

More videos from the Digitizing Alaska project that demonstrate the tradition of creative adaptation and give examples of digital entrepreneurship success stories

Community event suggestions

<http://lone-eagles.com/academy.htm>, <http://youtube.com/fodasz>

Web-raising

<http://lone-eagles.com/web-raising.htm>, <http://youtube.com/fodasz>

Local directories of Web-based businesses

<http://caithness.org/>, <http://lone-eagles.com/dillon.htm>

Online mentors roster

<http://lone-eagles.com/mentorsurvey.htm>

Frank Odasz is the president of Lone Eagle Consulting, which has specialized in rural, remote and indigenous Internet learning since 1997. Frank has offered workshops on rural ecommerce and telework strategies funded by USDA, USDOL, Alaska Department of Labor, NTIA/SBI and Connect Alaska. Lone Eagle's grassroots adventures range from delivering Internet workshops to 11 Alaska Native villages in 1998 to presenting rural broadband training best practices for Asia-Pacific Economic Cooperation (APEC International conferences). Recent online courses include teaching digital entrepreneurship as 21st-century workforce readiness.