

HOW TO HELP SOMEONE USE A COMPUTER

Adapted with permission from “The Network Observer” by Phil Agre¹

FIRST YOU HAVE TO TELL YOURSELF SOME THINGS

Nobody is born knowing this stuff.

You’ve forgotten what it’s like to be a beginner.

If it’s not obvious to them, it’s not obvious.

A computer is a means to an end. The person you’re helping probably cares mostly about the end. This is reasonable.

The best way to learn is through apprenticeship—that is, by doing some real task together with someone who has skills that you don’t have.

Your goal is not to solve their problem. Your goal is to help them become one notch more capable of solving their problem on their own.

Knowledge lives in communities, not individuals. A computer user who’s not part of a community of computer users is going to have a harder time of it than one who is.

By the time they ask you for help, they’ve probably tried several different things. As a result, their computer might be in a strange state. That’s not their fault.

¹ <http://dlis.gseis.ucla.edu/pagre/>

HAVING CONVINCED YOURSELF OF THESE THINGS, YOU WILL FIND YOURSELF MUCH MORE WILLING TO DO THE FOLLOWING

Never do something for someone that they are capable of doing for themselves.

Don't take the keyboard. Let them do all the typing, even if it's slower that way, and even if you have to point them to each and every key they need to type. That's the only way they're going to learn from the interaction.

Be aware of how abstract your language is. For example, "Get into the editor" is abstract and "press this key" is concrete. Don't say anything unless you intend for them to understand it. Keep adjusting your language downward towards concrete units until they start to get it, and then slowly adjust back up towards greater abstraction so long as they're following you. When formulating a take-home lesson ("when it does this and that, you should check such-and-such"), check once again that you're using language of the right degree of abstraction for this user right now.

Attend to the symbolism of the interaction. In particular, try not to tower over them. If at all possible, squat down so your eyes are just below the level of theirs. When they're looking at the computer, look at the computer. When they're looking at you, look back at them.

Find out what they're really trying to do. Is there another way to go about it?

Don't say "it's in the manuals". (You probably knew that.)